

THE
SALE
OF
LADY
DAVENTRY

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

In despair at the narrowness of her life as a country vicar's daughter, "the beautiful Miss Morland," when standing one day at the vicarage gate, exclaims, "For life and wealth and power I am ready to sell my soul."

"Will you sell yourself to me?" a pleasant voice replies.

Thus Jane Morland becomes the wife of Lord Daventry, and embarks upon her amazing career.

Life to her is a game to be played with calculated deliberation. Her hatred of the heir presumptive to the title and estates prompts her to a terrible revenge.

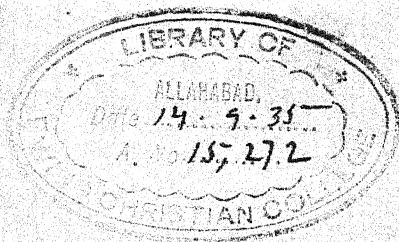
"The Sale of Lady Daventry" as a book of such originality and power is not easily to be forgotten.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

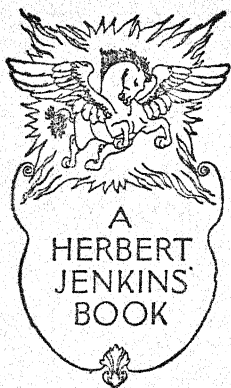
THE YOUNG ELIZABETH	7s. 6d. net.
ASHMORLANDS	2s. od. net.
THE JOYOUS PILGRIM	2s. od. net.
THE PRICE OF POSSESSION	2s. od. net.
THE INDIGNANT SPINSTERS	2s. od. net.

THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

BY
WINIFRED BOGGS



HERBERT JENKINS LIMITED
YORK ST., ST. JAMES'S, S.W.1



Tenth printing completing 79,180 copies

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY PURNELL AND SONS
PAULTON (SOMERSET) AND LONDON

DEDICATED TO
MY FRIEND E. H.

ENGLI

10/8/00

10/8/00

10/8/00

10/8/00

10/8/00

10/8/00

CONTENTS

BOOK I.

LADY DAVENTRY

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. REBELLION - - - - -	I
II. THE SALE - - - - -	9
III. THE WORLD OUTSIDE - - - - -	34
IV. THE WELCOME OF THE LISTER TWINS - - - - -	45
V. THE LISTER TWINS AND THE "ORPIN" - - - - -	52
VI. ENMITY - - - - -	60
VII. LORD DAVENTRY MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE - - - - -	68
VIII. HATE - - - - -	73
IX. THE SWING OF THE PENDULUM - - - - -	80
X. ADAM - - - - -	86
XI. SIN - - - - -	93
XII. LULU CONEYBEARE-FFIFFE - - - - -	103
XIII. A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT - - - - -	109
XIV. THE CONFESSION OF POTIPHAR'S WIFE - - - - -	113
XV. ACCUSED AND ACCUSER - - - - -	121
XVI. THE LAST OF DAVENTRY - - - - -	130
XVII. THE CITY OF DIS-ENCHANTMENT - - - - -	135
XVIII. THE LAST OF LIONEL, TENTH LORD DAVENTRY - - - - -	141
XIX. TAKING UP THE BURDEN - - - - -	147

BOOK II.

MARGARET LISTER: THE STRUGGLE

XX. THE TWO WORLDS - - - - -	155
XXI. ADAM'S WORLD IN RUINS - - - - -	161
XXII. CASTLES IN SPAIN - - - - -	169

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXIII. TAKING THE WORLD BY STORM - -	178
XXIV. THE BEGINNING OF A CAREER - -	186
XXV. NO. 29, CALLOGAN MANSIONS - -	199
XXVI. A YOUTHFUL PRANK - -	207
XXVII. DOROTHEA IS DISTURBED - -	217
XXVIII. NEXT BRUCE - -	223
XXIX. FINALLY TOM LISTER - -	231
XXX. WORK AND PLAY - -	235
XXXI. ADAM IS SORELY TRIED - -	241
XXXII. A CATASTROPHE - -	245
XXXIII. MISS LISTER IS NOT ALTOGETHER PLEASED -	252
XXXIV. SOME CRUDE REALITIES - -	261
XXXV. LOW WATER, AND "LUCK" - -	268
XXXVI. IMPUDENCE MAKES ANOTHER ASSAULT ON DIGNITY - -	278
XXXVII. LADY DAVENTRY CALLS AT CALLOGAN MANSIONS - -	281
XXXVIII. A STRANGE COINCIDENCE - -	290
XXXIX. NEWS OF THE ORPHAN - -	295
XL. AN ORPHAN SEEKS HIS FORTUNE - -	308
XLI. PHILIP AND HIS MOTHER - -	315
XLII. MISFORTUNES NEVER COME SINGLY -	321
XLIII. A TWENTY-FIRST BIRTHDAY - -	330
XLIV. HOW PHILIP "SAW TO IT" - -	344
XLV. BRUCE, TWELFTH LORD DAVENTRY -	351

BOOK III.

MARGARET LISTER: HUSBAND HUNTER

XLVI. FAME AND FORTUNE - -	359
XLVII. CAUGHT IN THE ACT - -	363
XLVIII. MILESTONES OF MATURITY - -	371
XLIX. THE BATTLE OF THE STAIRS - -	382
L. THE END OF A STRUGGLE - -	389
LI. CLOSING SCENES - -	397

THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

CHAPTER I

REBELLION

"The Devil was the first o' the name
From whom the race of rebels came."

—BUTLER.

INSIDE the Vicarage, Mrs. Morland with much cackle of meaningless chatter cut out unbeautiful garments for the deserving poor : in both the cackle and the cutting out, she was generously assisted by all the parochial ladies.

Outside the Vicarage, Mrs. Morland's eldest daughter, Jane, said what she thought of flannel petticoats and parochial ladies, and used a word unlovely upon the lips of any woman, but positively outrageous upon the lips of a clergyman's daughter.

She stood with her hot forehead pressed against the garden gate, anathematising "the common round, the daily task," half sobbing with impotent rage and longing.

Behind iron doors she looked out upon the joyous dancing feet of freedom. Oh, the maddening rhythm of the restless tramp of life, always passing, never pausing. Why should they stop for her, or care that she was left to unbearable bonds, she who knelt but to one god, the god of power? There was nothing so cruel, nothing so selfish as life. On, on, always on, that gay procession, the sandals of restlessness upon their feet, the skies of swift change over their heads. And all the rose-white youth of the world swelling past like a song.

Her cold blood grew suddenly hot and passionate as it

2 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

ached with desire for life, for power, for opportunity ; and resentment burned like a slow flame.

It was not fair. She was more than ordinarily clever, more than ordinarily beautiful, and brains and beauty alike were doomed to waste. For five-and-twenty years an utterly antagonistic environment had been her lot ; it would continue to be her lot, unless a miracle happened, for another five-and-twenty years. She would be fifty then, and what was there to win or lose at fifty ? Life trailed its wings behind at that dull age.

"Now is the accepted time !" she quoted ironically to herself, remembering the last sermon that had bored its way through her ungracious ears, "Now, now, to-day !" She could not afford to wait for youth at five-and-twenty. Like a flash it had come ; in another it would be gone. "Let what will happen to-morrow," she cried, "only let something, something happen to-day !"

She felt the bars press round her, bruising her rebellious body, while, like some desperate trapped animal, she flung herself against the locked door.

Where lay the key of freedom ?

Marriage ? The doctor's cub son ? The poor, but respectable, bank manager ? The same life in the same place with a wedding-ring on her finger and an uncongenial husband : the uncongenial claims of that husband, possibly of children. She disliked children, and the household. Scylla and Charybdis. The choice of the average woman perhaps, but then Jane Morland was very far from being average. She was not merely, and that only temporarily, "pretty," or "rather pretty," or "quite nice looking," she was beautiful. Neither was she merely a little intelligent, or a little stupid, but, and that in spite of all her disabilities, a remarkably clever woman.

Since for the clever more doors open, why did she not "earn her own living" ? Can a woman with no education, and without training do this easily ? Can she do it at all if she is too beautiful ?

There are so many kinds of cleverness ; the receptive brain can be educated to absorb the brains of others, pass examinations, obtain degrees, and so be qualified for certain posts. But there is a higher form than this, the leader not the follower, the creative brain, which owes little or

nothing to others; which is given little, but gives out much.

It is not necessarily the brain of an artist, but it is necessarily the brain of a thinker and of unlimited imagination and ambition. Napoleon had it; he desired to change the map of the world, to create a new empire; and he came near to doing it. A man of less imagination, less ruthlessness, would have said "impossible!" To the Napoleons of the world there is no such word. They may fail, but even their failure is magnificent, and infinitely above the success of the "lesser men."

Luther had this type of brain: he created a new God. There are men who have it to-day, with all its ruthlessness, its boundless imagination: they have created a new finance. Others have merely made great books, but they have crushed human souls between their pages.

Of these creators, Napoleon wading unmoved through a river of blood; the millionaire and his stream of gold; the artist genius tearing down the veils of reticence, dissecting (unconsciously, and because he must) the soul of his own wife; which of them, save only Luther, has clean hands? Those who see only the goal early rid themselves of that encumbrance called Conscience.

This woman weeping against a vicarage gate had a brain equal, if different, to any of these, but she did not know enough to be a governess. She was merely an adventuress with ice, not blood, in her veins. She disliked men, and she hated the thought of marriage; yet for wealth and position she would have endured worse.

She was so clever that she even knew her own limitations. In everyday life a perfect actress, she could not act upon the stage, dance, sing, or pose, and however exquisite, there was no demand for statues. She could not write, paint, or play. She had no domestic accomplishment, nor wished for any. There was really nothing she could do to break down the bars.

She had sought more than once to be "companion" to some old lady from whom her own relatives fled, for sometimes these old ladies live in the world, and sometimes they have male relatives with money, but one look at the exquisite face and figure of Jane Morland was enough.

She "was not suitable."

4 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

There seemed no way out ; yet for every gaol there was a gaoler, and a key. To find hers, to win freedom at any price, she would cheerfully have sold her soul.

With pitiless analysis, she saw her parents as they were : her father, a man of many ideals and more children, neither of which he could afford to support. Her mother, a struggling doctor's daughter, a woman who, destitute of ideals, possessed one idea, "to get married." She had "caught" (an odious, but in this case, correct term), the dreamy scholarly curate of her parish, and now as the wife of the vicar of Dullwinter, considered herself the chief personage of the village.

Having married herself, the next thing was to marry her daughters ; more especially as there was scarcely anybody to marry them to. Jane hated the curates of the next parishes who fell in love with her "through the medium of red flannel petticoats, and soup and Bible readings for the poor," as she phrased it. She also hated the doctor's cub son, who feared, while he desired her. She hit at him without mercy, and his slow wits could not follow. He was not a bad man, but all the worst of him rose to the surface in the presence of Jane. She aroused something cruel and savage in him, this woman of ice, of passionless physical perfection, who was not a human being but a brain.

He would marry her, he was the only possible "match," and he would make her pay. He would look at her with his sullen face more set and sullen, and red lights in his dull eyes ; and Jane, knowing his thoughts, would look back at him with cold mocking gaze, and laugh. She played him close to murder and suicide before she had done with him, though he was not bad, save in one evil woman's hands.

Eventually the young doctor would succeed to a practice "worth all of seven hundred a year," as he continually pointed out to Jane ; for he knew such women have to be bought. He did not realise that their price is high.

"Seven hundred a year !" echoed Jane with her ironical laugh, "but it's sinful to sell oneself for money ! And isn't it rather a far cry to 'eventually' ?"

The young man, clenching his hands, hated for the moment his father's hale fifty years. There might be no livelihood for another fifteen or twenty ; at present his share was only small.

"It's women like you who are at the back of crimes!" he burst out.

"Oh, we commit them ourselves," returned Jane, "only not for seven hundred a year. Our stakes are always worth while. If it was half a million and the world outside, then I might help you, possibly have to do it for you." She laughed.

Mrs. Morland, who had five other daughters and two sons, argued in vain with her eldest-born. "Such excellent prospects," she whined. "His father might die or retire any day, he said he would when James married."

"Die?"

"What more do you want? Lots of girls can't get husbands at all, and seven hundred! Look at the ten of us living on two hundred and fifty!"

"If you call it living, mother, I am tired of just existing. I dislike the idea of marriage, only wealth and a wider life could make it tolerable. Gwen Hartly was not nearly so good-looking as I, but a rich man saw her coming out of her father's church and married her, and if he is fat and a Jew, Gwen has a splendid time, too splendid to keep up with her old friends."

"Things like that don't happen often," said Mrs. Morland. "Don't let romantic notions spoil your chances, Jane."

Jane raised her perfect eyebrows, "Romantic!" she echoed. "What odd words to use, mother!"

"Always wanting what you can't get and spoiling your sister's chances!" exclaimed Mrs. Morland angrily. "What is to become of you if you don't marry?"

"I merely wish to marry to the best advantage. I shall probably dislike my husband extremely, and hate my children, if I have any." Her mouth took a rigid line. "I don't think Mother Nature had much hand in my making, therefore I must get something in return, and at least the chance of using my abilities. To possess abilities above the usual, and to feel them rusting. It's unbearable."

Her mother gasped and stared. "Abilities above the usual," she echoed, "why, you can do nothing. You can't cook a potato, make a blouse, sew a seam, or mend a tear. You can't play, or paint, or read aloud. You can do nothing except accounts. And what's the good of that," she asked

6 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

illogically, "when ours are always on the wrong side? You put a very absurd and exaggerated value upon yourself, and you'll find out your mistake as your betters have done, and come down to the crooked stick in the end."

"Twenty-five is not the end."

"I don't deny you are pretty, but that doesn't last. Every other girl in the parish is pretty, except your sisters. I was pretty once, look at me now. I lost my looks at five-and-twenty. Fortunately I was married."

"Fortunately?" echoed Jane, thinking of her father. She turned and regarded her mother, not without cruelty.

Certainly it was hard to believe that poor fat Mrs. Morland, with her thick features, red face, and hanging chins, had "been pretty once." It seemed an impossibility, even a monstrosity, and her daughter did not believe it. Yet Mrs. Morland could compare herself to the exquisite young goddess head and shoulders above her. Truly some women lack humour.

The "beautiful Miss Morland" was extremely tall, but so roundly slender that she missed being too tall. She carried herself with an easy, rather haughty grace, that her enemies, for want of a better word, called "pompous."

Her features were exquisitely cut; dead perfection if you will, but still perfection; she was a beautiful statue rather than a woman. The shape of head and face was classic in its outlines, her eyes were magnificent in colour and setting, though without fire or expression. Her black brows were a perfect arch, and red-gold hair rippled off her Grecian forehead in great loose waves. Her white skin was only faintly flushed with pink. She might have stood for the fair goddess of chastity, the vestal virgin of a temple. Though she thought of her beauty wasting, passing, it would not be likely to pass for a very long time, if ever.

"Nobody will marry the others while you are there, and you won't marry any one. It's most unfair. What do you expect to happen, Jane?"

"There's a trade in beauty even now," said the girl, "therefore my face must have a certain value. You consider that marriage is the only respectable profession. I prefer to face facts, and I say that as a profession, marriage is the least respectable. It is an abomination, though it's our creed and cant to pretend otherwise. At the same

time, I am ready to become abominable at the earliest opportunity, provided the hire is worthy of the wife."

Mrs. Morland's face grew a deeper purple. She was inexpressibly shocked, even frightened. "Nice" people never thought such things, let alone said them. Jane never cared what she said. She felt like one who had brought a monster into the world. And her people, and her husband's people, were so essentially respectable. Then she thrust back the fearful thought. How absurd to compare Jane to something monstrous, abnormal! -

But it was not absurd; it was very far from being absurd. Jane was abnormal.

She struggled for self-possession. "You'd be quite happy married to an ordinary man with enough to keep you, and children. All women are. It's Nature; it was meant."

"What a lot you have learned, mother!" Jane's cutting little laugh ended her words. "You think evil can come only of evil, but I have known these many years that the worst comes of boredom, and that is the true descent to Avernus. Your remedy is James, and James's possible seven hundred a year. It is not mine."

"Of course if you keep your head in the clouds, and mean to wait for the fairy prince . . . !" Mrs. Morland could be acid too. "Only there are not enough fairy princes to go round."

Jane laughed long and loudly, and when she laughed without thought, without restraint, her laughter spoilt the perfection of her face, as her ugly grasping hands spoilt the perfection of her arms, for it was harsh, unmirthful, strident.

To her, without dreams, without illusions, without even the desire for love, and quite devoid of its understanding in a sexual sense, the theory of the "fairy prince" was worse than ridiculous.

Fairy princes were matrimonial fancies, and she dealt in facts. She looked these facts in the face and to her they were ugly, and rather appalling. If she did not spare others, she did not spare herself. She knew her own limitations, and her own possibilities, and that these possibilities did not make for good. She knew that for ambition, for wealth, for power, there was no sin she would not

8 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

sin, no shrinking of her own nature that she would not overcome and bend to her purpose.

She might crucify others, but equally she would crucify herself.

"I have brains, though not marketable brains, but I have no heart," she told herself inexorably. "I am incapable of family affection. I have no capacity for love, though I sometimes think I have a vast capacity for hate. Love and marriage disgust me, motherhood appals. Religion makes me sick. I am abnormal, and what's the use of pretending I am not? My only motto is Self. I want to dazzle, to scheme and conquer, to hold the reins of place and power, and James Smithson is offered as the solution!"

As she stood by the gate she thought of all these things, went over them again and again, peered in vain for the loop-hole. It was easy to offer to sell her soul; it was not easy to find a buyer.

To be wasted! All that she was, all that she might be!

Yet even then the buyer was hurrying towards her, though it was no soul he sought. He did not take souls into consideration.

If she had been bidden gaze upon the feet of life coming towards her at last, Jane would have laughed in derision, have spoken scornfully of "the feet of death"; for her Perseus was old, and his feet dragged a little on the way.

The prison house! The prison house!

She hid her eyes, which burned with fierce unshed tears, against the topmost bar, and demoniac rage took possession of her. To have so much to sell, and none to buy! She clenched her evil ruthless hands, spoke aloud in her frenzy, knew the terrible thing she was saying, and meant every word of it.

"Listen, God!" she cried. "Listen, God or devil! Is there none to hear? Listen both of you, either of you: for life and wealth and power I am ready to sell my soul to God or devil or man!"

"Will you sell yourself to me?" asked a pleasant voice, and Lionel, tenth Lord Daventry, looked over the gate at her.

CHAPTER II

THE SALE

" Oh, where did you get that cold, cold drop
That makes your blood so thin?
And where did you get the curdled drop
That bids you shame your kin? "

The Viking's Son (PATRICIA WENTWORTH).

ALTHOUGH Lord Daventry had meant to be frank, he had not meant to be quite so frank as this. He knew exactly how much his wealth and position could buy, and how little. Some might have thought it a great deal, others too little; for him it was enough. He did not seek a woman who had love to bestow, but a woman who had none. The one would bestow her love, on others; the other would bestow nothing on anybody, and be a safe wife. He was seventy-five, and now for the third time he came to woo a young girl as his bride. The sun shone mercilessly on what had been a splendid manhood. It might, it did mock him, but it could not make him ridiculous. He was a ruin, but a stately, even a magnificent, ruin.

People called him a wicked, witty old man, and even Jane knew his reputation. He had been one of the handsomest, most fascinating, men of his day, and he had lived his life to the full. He had only a remnant left, and he meant to enjoy that remnant too, though with the discretion of old age. He would go on squeezing the orange dry till he died. He had great intellectual gifts, but had preferred to live entirely for amusement. Had he been a younger son with his way to make, there was little he could not have achieved, but he had cast away the great career with his eyes open, and never thought longingly of the Temple of Fame.

He knew women well, too well; he could place them at a glance. He had seen Jane three times, and had read her

10 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

correctly. He saw her cold and calculating, but believed her capable of gratitude and calm affection. She longed for power, and like Napoleon ached for worlds to conquer; and had a head well fitted to wear a crown. His secretary's careful inquiries had revealed much of Jane, many of her caustic speeches had been repeated to the appreciative old gallant. As a clergyman's daughter the girl would either abhor or adore good works, and his intuition, as well as his inquiries, told him she would not bring over-much of the odour of sanctity into his home. He had come on a visit of inspection, and been quick to take advantage of her open rebellion. Yes, he would marry her, and take her into Society, for he still did the Season almost as enthusiastically as ever. His splendidly guarded virility made him difficult to tire. He liked to watch the puppets at their play, pull the string too, sometimes even dance himself. But he wanted someone with the zest of youth and of starved joys to dance with him.

And so he looked over the gate at Jane. "Will you sell yourself to me?" he asked.

She stared at him, scarcely realising the import of his strange question.

"I have seen you driving past with Sir John," she said.

Sir John was the moss-grown old owner of Sunhold Court who now and then had other moss-grown old people to stay with him.

"In the future I hope to drive with you, not past you," returned Lord Daventry. He was the antithesis of his host Sir John whom he was visiting on a matter of duty rather than pleasure. "So you have noticed me?" he added. His eyes brightened: he grew younger of an instant.

"In a place where nothing happens one notices everything."

"Even an old man?"

"I had not noticed you were old," she said truthfully. "You are so unlike Sir John."

"Oh, he's never been young! That's the difference, Miss Morland; and it's the greatest in the world! Still you noticed another old man?"

He was pleased and persistent on this point.

✓ "An old man is an event, a young man a miracle," she

said with a characteristic twist of her lip, "neither come here, only clergymen. I am a Crusoe noting a footprint, and wondering what it can portend."

"You'll do," he said.

"Do for what?"

"Do for my wife, for Lady Daventry. If you will so far honour me?"

His bow was courtly, rather magnificent: in any other it would have been exaggerated.

"Lady Daventry!" she echoed.

Her hands were clenched on the top of the gate; her lips quite white. Lord Daventry looking at those hands, started a little. It was almost terrible to notice the hands of this very lovely woman, for they were ugly beyond description. As they clung to the gate they were like a miser's clutching the gold they could never let go. They were ruthless, cruel, greedy, and an offence to her otherwise most exquisite perfection. They came near to being her undoing, for the old man saw much, though not all, that they meant. They were the hands of one who would stop at nothing. Then his eyes went to face and figure, and he remembered his own power, and his own will. This woman would want much, but she had had nothing, and surely he could fill those greedy hands. Only by pleasing him, obeying him, could she gain what she wanted. Yes, he would take the risk.

"Ah, you prefer the sound of 'Lady Daventry,' to 'my wife'?" he said laughing a little, "yet fifty, forty years ago, I could have made that sound sweet too, even in your ears! So you will leave this," he pointed to the shabby vicarage, "for the world, the flesh, and the devil!"

The colour rushed to the girl's face, her eyes shone, she was more than lovely in that moment, and she had taken her hands off the gate. The statue was flushed into warm red living life by this old Pygmalion.

"And which are you?" she asked delightedly.

There were fifty years between them, and more than years, but this old man and young girl spoke the same language! For the first time Jane heard her own tongue, and it sounded deliriously sweet. Here was the first possibility of companionship she had ever known, here was rank, here was power, and the key to the locked door!

12 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

It was too good to be true. In a moment the mocking mirage would pass, and she be in the bitter acrid desert again.

"My enemies say the lot of 'em," chuckled the old peer, "my friends say the same; perhaps they are not far wrong. May I say myself that I am excellent in parts! There are worse things than the world, the flesh, and the devil, I assure you."

"I know," said Jane wryly, and pointed to the vicarage. "Treasure in heaven, for instance. I prefer mine here."

"And I offer it you here, three estates, a house in town, a villa close to Monte Carlo, fifty thousand a year, a peeress's coronet—and me!"

Jane's magnificent eyes grew warm with tears of joy and gratitude. Impulsively she seized the old man's hand, a hand, which for all its age, was beauty itself compared with hers, and kissed it.

"I can't pretend," she said huskily. "I'm bad, I suppose, but I'm not a hypocrite. Thank you, thank you, thank you! It's like a fairy tale!"

He laughed ruefully. "With rather an elderly fairy prince."

"I want no other. I hate young men, their ardour sickens me. They are so limited, so stupid. Marriage with one of them would be intolerable."

"The ice maiden," he said softly, looking into her eyes. "It's a long time since I read that story, but didn't she melt in the end?"

"I never read fairy tales," she returned prosaically. "I like planning, and figures, but I have no imagination." She did not realise she had this quality in excess.

"Then you miss a blessing and a curse."

"Perhaps, but I have never wanted it. I love to marshal facts, but fancies never appeal or intrude. I have a mania for organisation, and nothing to organise!"

"You shall organise to your heart's content," he promised her.

"What makes you want me for your wife, Lord Daventry? There are those of your world. I am not of it. I am only half," she laughed cynically, "my father's half, a lady. You speak of fifty thousand a year. I have scarcely had fifty shillings to spend. Are you not afraid that I shall not

be able to spend at all, or desire to spend too much? When a rich man takes a wife from a poor home, it is usually one or the other. They talk of the gilded cage, my cage has lacked all gilding. Why not a woman of your own position?"

Lord Daventry shrugged his shoulders. "I've married two of 'em," he said, "even at seventy-five I seek the fresh experiment."

"You cannot be so old!" she gasped, "I should never have guessed it!"

"No? It is only a short partnership, you see. After that, freedom, a competency, the Dowager Lady Daventry, and other men, my dear, other men! I don't like to think of it now, but I suppose it won't matter then. Will anything matter, I wonder, when we have passed through Death's portals?"

Jane heard only one sentence. "The Dowager Lady Daventry?" she asked quickly, and added, "Oh, I had forgotten you were a widower." Her face had shadowed. There was a crumpled rose-leaf after all, it seemed.

"For the second, and last time, I fancy." He laughed lightly. "To some their widowhood is a vocation, to others, an opportunity."

"Your wives? They had sons? How many have you, and how old are they? Are they married? Have you grandsons also?" She spoke a little sharply.

"Ah!" Lord Daventry smiled to himself, not altogether ill pleased. Facts were to be her playthings, not pretty fancies. Well, so be it!

"I have none," he answered. "Neither of my wives fulfilled their duty. I never had a child," he spoke deliberately, looking at her keenly. "My heir is my nephew, Bruce Daventry, who acts as my agent at Daventry Hall, and failing him a cousin, Coneybeare-Ffiffe, and his son Adam. I cannot hope for a son now," he added regretfully.

At the obstinate set of her lips he laughed softly to himself. Already she had determined to bring the future Lord Daventry into the world. If she succeeded there would be none more elated than herself.

Bruce Daventry did not altogether please his uncle, who was often exasperated by what he termed "priggishness," for Bruce was a young man of some ideals. He

14 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

offended by being more at home with his books and his pen than in the saddle, and though the Daventrys came of an intellectually brilliant stock, this was unpardonable. A man must be a sportsman first, and anything else he liked afterwards.

Lord Daventry was not only much cleverer than his nephew, but more virile physically, and had been a great athlete in his youth. Bruce hunted, carelessly, recklessly, but the keener zest was in the face of the older and more skilful rider. He would sooner think of the next heir, Coneybeare-Ffiffe, in his place, but Coneybeare-Ffiffe had a wife who made even Lord Daventry frown. The son Adam was a fine lad, with strong and marked characteristics and possibilities that formed a never-ending problem to the old peer, who loved the study of mankind, and was no amateur at the craft. The big, rather silent, school-boy was an ever-welcome visitor at Daventry Hall. The kind-hearted roué tried, as long as possible, to keep the boy blind to certain home aspects. He knew Adam had reared a great edifice on corrupt and frail foundations, and wondered what would happen when the lad's world fell in ruins about him. He would look at the young face, so strong, so sweet, so idealistic, and utter a peevish sound.

"Ideals, ideals are the devil, Adam!" he would say.

Adam in his ignorance would laugh. He did not know he had ideals, or that he was in any way different from the average Eton boy, crude, sometimes a little brutal, not over-fond of books, though clever enough, very fond of the games in which he excelled, and boyishly proud of his muscle and strength.

"To idealise a person, above all a woman, brings its own, and a very bitter punishment, Adam." And Lord Daventry smiled wryly at the thought of the boy's mother. "Expect the worst always; then sometimes one is agreeably surprised."

Again Adam in his ignorance would laugh. He did not know his relative saw the sword of Damocles suspended above his unconscious head: that perhaps there was one other who saw it too.

Failing the son he dare not hope for, Lord Daventry would have been content for Adam to succeed him; but there was nothing for it but to make the best of Bruce.

It was not the question of heirship that drove him to a fresh matrimonial experiment. He was marrying Jane entirely to please himself. He had married his first wife, a noted beauty and heiress, when both were in their first youth, and he had been "in love" with her for nearly a couple of months. Unfortunately she had remained in love with her handsome debonair husband rather longer than that, and much longer than he desired. Jealousy was added to her love, not without cause, and Lord Daventry grew annoyed. In the end, weary and well nigh heart-broken, she had bestowed her beauty in quarters where it was more appreciated, and her outraged and insulted husband had promptly divorced her. She had been dead for years.

His next venture was the rigidly-brought-up daughter of a great religious family. She had married him partly because her people told her it was a duty, partly because no woman could ever say no to the gallant masterful wooer. After a little while, she had become, as her husband wryly remarked, "fuller of good works than good companionship," and leaving her to her pious deeds, he had performed works far from pious elsewhere. He had had to endure the tie longer than he cared about, not that he allowed it to be a tie, since she did not believe in divorce, and refused the remedy in her power.

She had now been dead a year, and but for the fact that he had been unable to find anyone quite suitable, he would have been married for the third time. But though it would have been easy to get a young and beautiful wife, it was not easy to get the type he wanted. She must be, in every sense of the word, presentable, but not, this time, necessarily in Society. Rather would he find some rare country flower, show her the world, and in her youthful enjoyment and zest, recapture his own lost youth. But she must be "safe" without being dull, and hitherto he had found the safe entirely dull. No demure country girl flashing into skittish matron, for him. No brainless, unintellectual fool, or insipid nonentity. He wanted a companion this time.

He had begun to despair of getting what he wanted when he saw Jane, and at once made up his mind. This was the woman he was looking for. He saw her brilliant as well as

16 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

ambitious. She would bring him credit, as well as happiness. It would be May and December, but May and December with companionship between them, and more than one meeting point. The longer he talked with her, the greater grew his delight in the treasure he had secured.

Jane already knew the name of her crumpled rose-leaf ; already she hated him, was filled with overpowering curiosity about him. "What is he like, Bruce Daventry ?" she asked.

"Like ? He is like me. All we Daventrys are alike, true to type, as the saying is. Only he is fair, red-haired, and I am dark. He has the artistic eyebrows, long and arched, which are supposed to denote the artistic temperament, with, or without, in his case most distinctly without, the art. Yes, we are strangely like, and strangely unlike. The dark Daventrys are supposed to have the better brains, the fair the better character." He knit his thick short eyebrows which lay close to his eyes, and laughed, and shrugged his shoulders. "The uncle is a sinner, the nephew a saint. Do you like good young men ?"

"I hate them," returned Jane curtly, "and curates are not good. They only think they are, and hope other people think so too. They just pretend better, that's all. Is your nephew one of the pretenders ?"

Lord Daventry was a just man, as he saw justice. "No," he answered, "he does not pretend at all. Whatever he is, he is absolutely genuine. You will not need to hate him."

But Jane already hated him. She would have power for a year or so ; then this Bruce Daventry would take it away. She would be nobody. Her imagination already saw that bitter day.

"Then you dislike him ?" she asked.

"I do not know. At times he annoys me ; but he is an excellent agent, a far better agent than he is a litterateur, though it is the last he prides himself upon. He compels me to respect him," he added, knitting his eyebrows, "and one always resents the uncomfortable, you know. He is twenty-three, I am seventy-five, and the respect is in the wrong quarter ! My own agent trained him specially for five years, and when he died eight or nine months ago,

Bruce took over everything, and nobody has any complaints to make. That is rather wonderful as things go."

Then the young man was not a fool. Jane was disappointed. She would have had him a fool. "I suppose so," she said slowly.

"As my agent he is admirable, it is as my heir he falls rather short in my eyes. I'd give a good deal to have young Adam in his place, but we cannot choose in these matters. Only it is a little funny, isn't it, to think of the rake succeeded by the monk?"

But Jane had heard enough of the heir living at the gates of her new home, and could not endure to hear any more just then. She changed the subject. "Why did you think of me?" she asked curiously. "Was it just my looks?" She spoke in a matter-of-fact tone.

He looked at her critically. "You are almost the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he said at length, "and I flatter myself I have looked upon the world's beauties, but almost is not quite."

"You have known some more beautiful?" asked Jane, not vainly, but interested.

"One," he corrected, "but only more beautiful because she had fire, passion, impulse such as you could never know. As a young man I should have married her. At seventy-five I could neither hope to light the flame nor retain it. I could only have looked on while another did that, and I've never been good at merely looking on. It was not altogether your beauty, it was almost more your character, your brains."

"But how could you know I had any? My mother says I have no abilities, nothing!"

"Many never reveal themselves to the members of their own household. But there was another reason, you may laugh at it if you will, I am in love with you."

"Why should I laugh?" asked Jane in amazement. "I am very glad, very thankful."

"Many would laugh, to themselves," he retorted. "To me they would of course profess an answering love, as long as it suited their interests to do so. Well, I don't want that sort of thing. As for me . . ." he laughed. "Well, my dear, I've fallen in love, and out of it, a hundred times, and am fortunate to keep the capacity so long! There have been

18 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

a great many flames, but never one vast conflagration. That is so uncomfortable : one prefers the other to do it. It's waste, you know : all the eggs in one basket ; and eggs have a way of getting broken. You've brought me love again, and you've brought me youth. Your true lover is never old." At that moment he looked scarcely more than a man in his prime.

"I think you are very wonderful," said Jane awestruck, "I shall be very proud to be your wife, for what you are as well as for what you have."

Nothing could have delighted him more than that genuine compliment. "Flattery from the well of truth!" he exclaimed. "You shall open the oyster called the world, child!"

"Then I have succeeded in selling myself to the devil!" exclaimed Jane thankfully. "I was so afraid he would not buy!"

"He always buys," answered Lord Daventry as one who knew, "but sometimes he does not pay."

"This time he did : he brought you. He has given me a much higher price than I dreamed of. I thought he only paid like that for the souls of saints. And mine, you know," she ended with an expressive shrug, "I expect I shall ever try and cheat him if I live to be old enough, the quick and easy death-bed repentance, you know. There are quite a lot of ancient reprobates in this parish who are determined not to do to-day, in spite of my father, what they can put off till to-morrow. They will cheat him too if they can, enjoy both this world till it is passing from them, and the next."

"Any fool can dodge the devil," returned Lord Daventry, "but it takes something akin to genius to dodge consequences. Of course consequences are actually the devil. Now I'm up against something worse than the devil, and that is Anno domini. Will you help me to dodge that for a little time, my dear? Will you give me my 'crowded hour of glorious life'? It will seem but an hour in your company. There's the zest for twenty years yet in this old body of mine, but Nature's finger must write its inexorable Finis long before the zest is over. Will you walk in step with me for the little journey that is left?"

He held out his hands.

She placed her own in them. "I will, I will!" she cried. "You are giving me so much! Oh, show me something I can give in return?"

"Am I not asking for yourself; could I ask more? And when my day is done, as done it must be soon, you will be young and beautiful and free to choose the youth and love that is not mine to give."

"I don't want it, I dislike that sort of thing. I don't want you to die, nothing would ever persuade me to marry again."

"My dear, you are young, and what you do after I am dust, matters nothing to me, but before that comes to pass everything matters, and you will be good enough to remember it."

His voice grew harsh and stern, his face saturnine. "I've been the partner in many a deceit, I shall be nothing of the sort in yours, and least of all blind. No lovers, no deceptions, do you hear me, girl? Flirt if you like with many, that will amuse me, but grant nothing to one! I should have mercy, and though few have been rash enough to risk enmity, yet there have been one or two, and they live to regret it. You'll be a beautiful young woman with an old husband and a dozen sighing lovers. Keep 'em sighing, do you understand?"

A flash of cruelty came into Jane's eyes. "I love to play with mice," she said, "but to me they remain mice; they never become men. You are the only man I have ever met. I do not want to play with you. I want your friendship. Except for the sense of power men's admiration gives me, it is nothing; it finds and leaves me cold, and as for caring for a man in the way you mean—" she broke off with an incredulous laugh, "well, it is just impossible. I suppose there are women like that; at least I am not one. I can only care very much for myself," she added with brutal frankness.

His eyes, keenly fierce, probed hers, then he patted her hands well-pleased, and drew her to him. His fortune was greater than he had supposed.

"Give me a kiss to seal the bargain?" he said gently.

Without any hesitation she lifted her fresh young lips to his, and slipped her hand through his arm as he leant against the gate: for he had not yet come inside. "I

really like you awfully," she said simply. "We will be such companions, and it'll be the first friendship I've ever known. I've never been able to be myself with anybody; with you I need be nothing else."

His eyes softened, they were handsome eyes still. "Your best friend, I hope, my dear."

"Oh yes!" She had no doubt on the subject. "I can never repay you, but I will be to you whatever you wish."

"I shall not try your patience overmuch, and I am easy enough to live with, child, save when I've got the gout, which is oftener than I like these days, confound it!"

His laugh was rueful. It was easy to talk of youth, but he did not talk like that, or feel like that, when his enemy laid hold of him. Then he became a very cross and pain-racked old man, who would have repented all his misdeeds if any physical ease could have been obtained by it.

"Then I'll nurse you," she said.

"And get more kicks than halfpence, my dear. I'm a devil when gout and I keep house together!"

"Oh, you won't frighten me," she returned serenely, "nothing ever frightens me, certainly not men in tempers."

"But I throw things, and my aim is good," he chuckled, "and I suppose I'd throw just the same at a woman, even a young one, Heaven forgive me! Gout plays the deuce with breeding."

"I could learn to dodge," said Jane cheerfully, "I always seem to have been dodging something, curates, services, or relations. Now it is to be the devil, and an invalid's aim, and after curates, and services, and relations, it seems quite dreadfully simple. Anyway I should want to do something for you who are doing so much for me."

"Merely to please myself, my dear."

"But it pleases me too, more than anything in the world, and what am I marrying for but to please myself, so that's equal, you see."

"A selfish pair indeed—but a pair in concord, it seems! And what is your name, my dear? I believe it is usual to know one's fiancée's name."

The girl blushed with chagrin. "Jane," she owned.

"I think I can bear Jane," he smiled, "Lady Daventry shall make that name the fashion. Will you call me Daventry, or would you rather it was Lionel?"

"For a husband Daventry would do," she answered, "but for a friend and companion I would like it to be Lionel. I think Jane is dreadful, but mother——"

"By-the-bye," he interrupted, "we have been so very frank, that perhaps you will forgive me if I am franker still, a little rude in fact. I want it to be strictly understood that I am marrying you. I am not marrying your family."

"Nobody would want to," said Jane cynically, "and least of all should I want them to. But I except my father, he is different. And he will be very angry."

"That you are to have rank and riches?" Lord Daventry was surprised. He had not so far found anger among prospective fathers-in-law.

"No," said Jane gravely, "but he will not see the marriage as we do. He won't be able to stand our point of view. You see he has ideals."

Lord Daventry made a wry face. "Another idealist!" he said, thinking of his nephew. "Certainly they are difficult to deal with at any time."

"I do not know that I am capable of caring for him," said Jane, "but I can respect my father, and he is a gentleman." Her eyes were suddenly a little defiant.

"You must get your breeding from somewhere, Jane: but your path, and the paths of your people henceforth must lie far apart."

Her voice was hard and contemptuous as she answered, "I never wish to see any of them again, but I do not want to break with father altogether, not more than he will force me to. He has sacrificed everything for what he thought right, he has got nothing out of life, and he married mother. She made him."

"He can come on an annual visit to the castle: as for the rest, I shall settle a small sum apiece on them, enough to start them in life; there's a good living vacant in Grasshire, at least the incumbent is dying, and I never go to Grasshire. How many of you are there, Jane?"

"Nine."

"Almost as bad as the Listers! And of course not enough for one, no prospects, no future?"

Jane shrugged her shoulders. "One would call it improvident, if it wasn't so clerical. We haven't even any brains."

22 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"Yourself excepted."

"Useless, or would have been but for you. The others haven't any sort at all."

"It's an odd world, my dear, an odd world! I have half a dozen mansions and never a child to put in one of them! You have nine crushed in there!" He pointed to the small dingy vicarage. "And the Lord doesn't always provide, and I have seen the seed of the righteous begging their bread."

"So have I," returned Jane curtly, "but father never has; he won't look. He just has faith. Unfortunately you can't eat faith, and as clothes civilisation would consider it inadequate."

"You poor child! But all that shall be put straight. Is this your mother coming in search of you?" His short dark eyebrows drew together for an instant.

Mrs. Morland, carrying in one hand a bifurcated garment of such bulk and coarseness, that it could be meant only to rasp the skin of the poor, in the other a huge pair of scissors, advanced upon her daughter unconscious of the visitor half-hidden by the gate and the hedge.

"Jane!" she cried peevishly, "whatever are you thinking of, going off like this and setting such a bad example to the parish! How often must I remind you of our position, our authority? If the vicar's daughter shirks how can I reprove the other girls for being idle? There is this pair of— Oh, goodness me! I beg your pardon, Lord Daventry. Have you called to see the vicar?" With a face extra red with confusion she began to pull forward the gate.

Lord Daventry took off his hat. "Allow me," he said, and opening the gate, he came inside.

He met Jane's amused glance with a little twinkle in his keen old eyes. Mrs. Morland was performing strange antics in her eagerness to hide what she considered highly indecent garments, behind her back, only exposing their nature the more crudely.

"I think you had better give them to me, mother," said Jane calmly. She took forcible possession of the red flannel atrocities and folded them carelessly.

"Hush!" cautioned Mrs. Morland in a stage whisper, and again the eyes of the two cynical worldlings met. The

vicar's wife was deeply shocked and mortified. What would the great man, Lord Daventry, think of them. Everybody had heard of Lord Daventry, his old title, his riches, his power, his fascinating wickedness, so easily forgiven in a peer. Her gaze almost upset her guest's gravity. He had known his quest must be interesting; he had not hoped to find it amusing. If he had permitted the possibility of future relationship with his mother-in-law, he would not have found her entertaining, but after the marriage he would never see her again.

He wondered what she would say or do when she knew. His eyes began to glint, and he stooped towards Jane, deliberately taking her bundle from her. "Allow me, my dear," he said pleasantly, "I cannot permit my future wife to carry parcels."

His face was very demure.

Jane's eyes laughed into his, then she glanced quickly at her mother who was trembling with agitation.

"Jane!" shrieked the poor lady frantically, doubting the evidence of her own ears. "Jane, are you mad? To let Lord Daventry take—take——"

"The good works intended for the poor," he interrupted gravely, feeling the flannel critically between finger and thumb, and adding so that only Jane could hear, "Unhappy Poor, what hides they must have to be sure!"

Then he turned to the startled matron, "I assure you they are quite delightfully familiar," he said. "The late Lady Daventry was also given to good works. I dare not venture to hope my future wife will also be canonised as a saint. Two saints would be almost more than my deserts, I fear."

And to Jane he added aside, "Or my desires."

Mrs. Morland gave a gasp; her purple face grew a deeper mulberry. His future wife! Was the world turning upside down? It was certainly reeling round her at that moment. Jane his future wife! Jane, her daughter, Lady Daventry! Lord Daventry, "my son-in-law, you know." Impossible, such things did not happen! And yet, and yet, Jane was "very pretty," and somehow, "different." Things might happen to Jane: she had an air of expecting things to happen, of claiming them as her right. Such a destiny,

24 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

though too magnificent to be believed in, seemed far from incongruous.

Her imagination flashed on ahead. They would go constantly on visits to the Daventrys, "do" the London Season; the other girls, plain as they were, would easily find husbands, perhaps titled ones. She would be the mother and grandmother of a vast aristocracy. Ernest would be made a bishop at once; he also would be "my lord." Then Archbishop . . . her imagination became delirious. Then suddenly its glories passed; and she fell abruptly to earth again. It was too good to be true. Jane was standing there calm and unconcerned; she could not stand like that if she was going to be Lady Daventry. It was a mistake, a hideous joke. Her face twisted rather horribly, the blood sang in her ears, and she wondered if she was going to have a fit.

Once more she looked at the daughter she knew so little of, remembered that Jane was always calm and cold, had an air of taking everything for granted, good, bad, or indifferent. The girl was ambitious, had ideas "beyond herself"; sometimes those sort of girls did realise their dreams.

She began to tremble violently, and in her excitement advanced towards Lord Daventry, snapping the scissors frantically at him.

He dodged her, laughing a little acidly. "Do you take me for a piece of red flannel, Mrs. Morland?"

"But you said Jane?" she stammered. "That you, that she—— You were joking, of course?" She waited breathlessly.

"If marriage be a joke as well as a lottery, I was certainly joking," he retorted; "but surely marriage should be taken seriously, if at all? I have the honour to ask your consent, and your husband's consent, to my marriage with your daughter, the very first day it can be arranged." He bowed formally.

This was plain enough! The impossible, the utterly glorious had happened! Mrs. Morland could not speak, but her mouth opened and shut, and she snapped the scissors in time to it. It was all extremely ridiculous and not very dignified. At length she managed to gasp out:

"But a trousseau——"

Lady Daventry and I will choose that together," he said, and somehow Mrs. Morland felt that when Jane became Lady Daventry she would be even less her daughter.

"I shall get a special licence," he went on, "and ask your good husband to marry us at once. If you will allow me to see him now, perhaps we could get our little talk over."

"It is a great honour!" the delighted woman got out at length, and added tactlessly, "To think of you as my son-in-law!"

"As your daughter's husband, madam," he returned almost menacingly, "or rather your daughter as my wife."

But Mrs. Morland was not quick at seeing nice distinctions. "Of course," she gushed. "And what am I to call you now?" She looked up at him archly. She knew his name was Lionel, and had a vision of the great man as "Len."

"Lord Daventry," he returned, and his voice was stony.

"Oh!" She felt the snub, but recovered quickly. The glorious fact remained. "If you wish the marriage to take place at once it should be announced," she said.

"Certainly," he agreed, smiling. She was not altogether a fool, it seemed. He thought she meant *The Morning Post*; but she meant the parochial ladies in the vicarage.

The triumphant mother flew inside with her great news, and it might truly be said to be the happiest hour of her life, while Lord Daventry sought Mr. Morland in his study.

Would he also be amusing, he wondered. But Mr. Morland was not in the least amusing, very far from it.

As he rose unsuspectingly to greet his visitor and his daughter, for Jane decided it was better she should be present, Lord Daventry murmured to himself, "A scholar, dreamer, idealist, and a gentleman." Somehow he was surprised, for though he had seen Jane for what she was, he had also seen Mrs. Morland.

In a few words he explained his errand.

"You cannot be in earnest," said Mr. Morland gravely; "the thing is, of course, impossible."

"Why?"

26 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"There are many reasons." The speaker's face was stern. "My daughter is not of your world or of your class."

"My wife takes my rank, and will shed lustre on my name."

"That is not all. Pardon me, but you are an old man, my daughter a young girl. Such marriages are a sin against God and a sin against nature."

"A fanatic!" Lord Daventry mentally decided, but not without a certain admiration. She is willing to forgive me my age," he said aloud.

"There is no question of forgiveness," said Jane.

Her father did not heed her interruption. "To sell you my youth, I think you mean?" The eyes of the dreamer were rather terrible in that moment. "That is not all. The world knows what your life has been."

"It knows I have never been a fool: I have enjoyed, but I have not wallowed. I am healthy, my brain is as clear as ever, my intellect unimpaired. I am too old to be gay and faithless any longer." He laughed, half sadly, half humorously.

"You are, forgive me! a rake of seventy-five; she is an innocent girl. Jane will never marry you with my consent."

Jane looked at her father quickly, and her face grew set and ruthless. But she did not speak.

"I am sorry," said the suitor sincerely: "I am sure she will regret, as I shall do, to have to do without it."

The glances of the two men encountered like the clash of swords. The parson drew his long thin figure to its full height; in that moment he looked a soldier rather than a clergyman.

"Father," broke in Jane very softly, "your opposition is useless. I am twenty-five, my eyes are open, and I have decided. There is nothing more to be said."

"There is everything to be said," declared her father passionately. "There is decency——"

"I have decided. I never hoped for anything so good as this, and I am very grateful to Lord Daventry."

"Grateful, Jane, grateful! You don't know what you are saying! You speak out of ignorance, child. Do you think Heaven will call this marriage? It will call it by a much uglier name!"

"But the world will call it marriage," returned Jane, with her cynical little laugh, "and it's the world we live in, not Heaven, father!"

"You will be no better than the woman who sells herself for hire—you will merely have obtained a bigger price; and you will be infinitely below the woman who gives herself for love, sinner as the world calls her."

"I did not know the world called her a sinner, I thought it called her a fool, and that was why it enacted the bitterest payment. And, father, at least be thankful Lord Daventry offered the reputable price, for I should have taken the other."

Mr. Morland put up his hand as if to ward off a blow. "If you can talk like this, though I cannot believe you know what you are saying, then you are indeed a suitable partner for such as Lord Daventry."

"I know what I am saying," she returned, "there has been too much pretending. Lord Daventry and I are indeed suited, more suited than you can ever imagine. Father, I have never had a companion, never had a friend! Think for a minute what that means! Lord Daventry will be friend and companion to me. I have longed for the world outside, and been shut inside these gates! Lord Daventry will give me the world." She went up to him, slipped her hand within his arm. "Don't nip our young affections in the bud," she went on, and her harsh strident laugh made her old lover frown, "it's such a chance for me, and for you! Lord Daventry is going to settle some money on the others, and has a good living in his gift."

"I prefer to provide for my own children," said Mr. Morland, pressing his fine lips together, "and I refuse such terms. Neither will I accept a benefice at the hand of my daughter's purchaser."

To any but Jane, her eyes only on the goal, that word would have been a lash of stinging scorn, but her it passed by. She had no fine feelings to be wounded.

Lord Daventry winced inwardly. "You can refuse for yourself," he said coldly, "You have no power to refuse for others."

"And there are such a lot of us, father," said Jane, with cruelty in her tones, though they were soft and low, "and

28 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

no prospects, no future! Nine, and without a dog's chance among us! If anything happened to you—and things happen even to clergymen—it means starvation."

The light of the fanatic blazed in Mr. Morland's fine eyes. He raised his hand, threw back his head, held high the inward insignia of the cross. "'I have been young and now am old; and yet never saw I the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging his bread,'" he quoted.

"You have not chosen to see it, father; but it happens. There are the children of the men who had this living before you. One is driving a cab, the others are scarcely more successful, and they were not bad or idle, they were merely left beggars young, and there had been no money for their education. The daughters are 'lady helps,' only one is married, and that one to a struggling clergyman. You are not in the pulpit now dealing with God and death and Heaven, which are easy to deal with as long as they stand a long way off, but down with facts and life. You forget, too, that we are not 'the righteous,' we children. You are a saint, but your offspring are sinners; unfortunately they are not even clever sinners."

"I must make one exception," murmured Lord Daventry. Yet he was a little sorry for the other, a little regretful for his fiancée's ruthless brutality.

"Such brains as I possess," retorted Jane, "are useless without the opportunity to use them, and those of the others would be useless with all the power, all the opportunity, in the world. I thank Lord Daventry for his generous intentions as they and my mother will."

"So not content with selling yourself, you will sell us all, my daughter."

Mr. Morland's face was white and dazed as he looked from one to the other. For all her coldness, her incomprehensibility, his beautiful Jane had been the earthly idol of his heart. "Because he is rich and titled."

"Only partly because he is rich and titled," said Jane truthfully, "more because we speak the same language, have the same tastes. I like him, can give him more than I could a young man. I hate young men."

"Nonsense!" cried Mr. Morland angrily. He believed, and had good reason to believe, that all young girls liked

young men. It was only to be expected, and marriage was ordained of the Most High!

"I really do," persisted Jane.

"Ill will come of this marriage!" Mr. Morland became a seer uttering a prophecy.

"Ill comes of many marriages," said Jane cynically, "though we like to pretend it doesn't: the death of love, of illusion, too many children, or none. Ill comes of many things, but most of all from poverty, and from body and soul starvation."

The Morlands had always had enough to eat, though not what they would have liked to eat, and sufficient clothes, though not the clothes they would have chosen, and Jane's one cruel gibe glanced off, but the other did not.

"Soul starvation!" echoed Mr. Morland, sick at heart.

"Is that what you have found here? All you found?"

Again Lord Daventry was sorry for the other, would have spared him if he could.

But Jane, marching to her goal, knew no mercy.

"Perhaps not that," she said bitterly, "since I have no soul. Say rather the frustration of my youth, beauty, hopes, powers. Time, life, goes on, always leaving me behind. I look out of my bars, and the pageant passes! Others play: I sicken and die. Others join in the merry dance: I stand up against the wall, and the mad ache of my feet must be stilled. That is all, father. Your youth lies behind; calm middle-age, work and content, is yours; you cannot even imagine what it is to be young. You do not feel any longer with the keenness and agony of youth. You are on one side of the scale, we on the other, and your heavy platitudes would weigh us down. You do not realise that those whose youth has known no pleasure or happiness have been cheated by God or man, sometimes by both. You will not let the children keep wild birds in cages because it is cruel, and the creatures break their hearts, but you keep your daughters there. It does not matter about their hearts, I suppose. You know they will not often break, they will merely become a little hard, grow apathetic with time. I could not bear it any longer. Then the key of my prison-house is put into my hands, and you forbid me to unlock the door! Is it just, is it logical?"

She drew a long breath, her face flushed with colour, for

30 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

she spoke truly enough when she said her endurance was at an end. Go back! Nay, she would wade to her desires through blood if need be.

Life! Life!

She had put out groping piteous fingers towards it, but always it passed on, leaving a trail of mocking laughter in its wake. This time it paused, its fingers caught hers, held strongly: its gay voice bade her join the gay procession. Was she to shake off those welcome fingers because she had a dreamer and an idealist for a father, a man who all his life, like many of his craft, kept his face turned from its facts? Never! Never! Her greedy fingers clung fiercely, tenaciously; only death could unfasten them now. She too would dance in the sun: she too would gather the rosebuds while she might.

"Jane! Jane!"

Then Mr. Morland pulled himself together. "Lord Daventry's reputation is bad," he forced himself to say with dry lips.

"It really is," agreed the peer; "I'm sorry, but I quite forgot to mention that, Jane."

"What does it matter?" she asked impatiently, "I like you as you are now. A past is past; a present a different thing."

"The past has been known to become the present," said Mr. Morland, "but you think such things do not matter." His pain-filled eyes looked past her. "God forgive me for so failing in my own household!" he exclaimed brokenly.

"It wasn't your fault, father. You have always done what you thought right." Jane's voice was a little less cold. "You have not sacrificed me to yourself; you would have sacrificed yourself for my good and happiness, only you do not know what is for my good and happiness. You are not like some of the mothers one sees, who, having taken their own joy and their own youth, demand their daughters' also, and would put obstacles in the way of their finding husbands because they need an unpaid nurse, companion, or housekeeper. You have nothing to reproach yourself with, but you must let me go now. I am a 'sport,' I have nothing of you in me, nothing of my mother. You will see for yourself that I am happy: Lord Daventry has promised that you shall come and stay with me each year."

"I forbid the marriage." His face was inexorable.

"Father, it is not a question whether I do or do not marry this man ; it is merely a question whether I marry him with your consent or without it."

"That is the exact position," assented Lord Daventry.

"I am sorry," and he meant it.

"I am the cuckoo in the nest, and have always known it : cast me out and be at peace."

"I will not throw you to the Minotaur," returned Mr. Morland, fighting steadily with his back to the wall. "Oh, Jane, you see only one side of the picture ! You will be a young and beautiful girl, rich, socially great, tied to an old man, while youth must call to youth, and you will live in a world where virtue is only a jest. Everybody knows how brilliant and how evil are the people Lord Daventry calls his friends."

His eyes burnt steadily in his white face.

"Then youth will call in vain !" retorted Jane with an amused laugh.

"I think you can trust me to see to that, sir," said Lord Daventry drily ; "also, many of my acquaintances are noble and excellent people in every sense of the word, your sense as well as mine. It takes all sorts to make a world, whether it is the world of a slum, or a parish such as this, or that world called Society. Human nature is the same all the world over : the good, the bad, the mixtures. You can find what you seek, and what is most suited to you, in any class. I am going to be very proud of my wife, and trustful too. I know men well, but I know women better."

"Father, Lord Daventry looked over the gate at me, and in five minutes he knew more of me than you know after five-and-twenty years."

"Such knowledge must have been gained in ways little to his credit, Jane. Perhaps he will know you too well for your liking some of these days."

"I am ready to risk it."

"I think you are ready to risk a very great deal, more than you realise, my daughter."

"But not more than I realise," said Lord Daventry suavely. "Am I to understand the marriage is to lack your consent ?"

"My consent, and my presence, Lord Daventry."

32 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"Father! It will make such talk!"

"Then 'talk' is a thing that matters to you, Jane! I was beginning to believe that nothing mattered. From the day the world calls you by the title of Lady Daventry, I call you no more my daughter."

"Father!" She stared incredulously. "And because I am marrying well!"

"Because you are marrying . . . abominably."

"The others, they are nothing to me, or I to them, but you and I—I have cared for you, in my way."

"Your way does not honour me, Jane. I have failed in a sacred trust, and I must bear the punishment. It is for you to decide."

"I have decided," said the girl firmly, and placed her hand in Lord Daventry's.

Then they left the defeated man standing alone with his God, his defeat, his own wrung soul.

The worldlings had been pitted against a faith they believed dying or dead; they had been merciless and victorious: yet on the face of the vanquished dreamer shone something greater than their victory, higher than their brilliance, a faith that nothing could shake, a foundation builded on rock that no assault could undermine. The failure was far more magnificent than the success, though none knew it.

The marriage took place very shortly after. It was attended by all who had known Jane, little or well, and by many who hoped, quite vainly, to know her better. Her delighted mother was there, as were all her brothers and sisters, envious, and yet not altogether astonished. Jane was Jane. There was no more to be said. Some were created for the world: for some the world was created.

As the bride came out of the church, leaning on her husband's arm, her face wholly radiant and very lovely, her wedding-bells clashed musically on the breeze, carrying the sound into the next county, and a vivid streak of sunshine lingered on her red-gold head. Beneath her feet the school-children had strewn roses, and right regally she swept over their dying fragrant petals, as a queen entering her kingdom.

So it was "happy is the bride the sun shines on," and

"roses, roses all the way," for the third wife of the tenth Lord Daventry.

In a battered little church on a hillside her father knelt with his face in his hands, sorely ashamed for one who had no shame for herself, nor any misgiving. He never saw his daughter again, for not long after her marriage he died suddenly of a heart affection from which he had suffered in secret for years.

Jane did not ask herself if she had helped to kill him ; she could only have answered in the affirmative ; she did not ask herself any questions at all. She was too busy being Lady Daventry and examining that oyster called the world.

Mrs. Morland accompanied her large tribe across the seas, where, through the generous aid of Lord Daventry, and the labour of their hands, a solid homely future was carved out by the little band. The boys did well, the girls married ; none of them were unprosperous.

To the last day of her life Mrs. Morland was happy in the constant mention of " my daughter, Lady Daventry," and rather haughty and superior towards those mothers who had nothing but mere commoners for their sons-in-law.

She had an idea that Lord Daventry both respected and admired her, and regretted that fate decreed they should see nothing of each other.

CHAPTER III

THE WORLD OUTSIDE

"The world is a staircase, some are going up and some are coming down."—*Italian Proverb.*

LORD DAVENTRY took his wife abroad, showed her "all the kingdoms of the earth," and subtly educated her. They wintered in Egypt, and here Lady Daventry met many of her husband's acquaintances fleeing from the disagreeables of an English winter. The remarkable old man, and the no less remarkable young woman, made a striking couple, and it became rather the fashion to know "the new Lady Daventry." Her wonderful beauty, her obvious devotion to her old husband, her delight in his companionship, roused a storm of comment and curiosity. A woman who had been "the beauty" till Lady Daventry appeared, when she became merely "well-preserved," said it was a "pose," and would not last; she also said, paradoxically, that "the more you know her, the less you know her," and added that "of course she buys all those plaits." For Lady Daventry's magnificent red-gold hair was thought almost too good to be true. The great loose waves falling off the Grecian forehead were genuine perhaps, one could not imitate that skilfully enough to pass, but the hair worn in a great shining coronet could not be all her own. The ex-beauty was compelled, albeit reluctantly, to concede the perfect skin, but she would not allow the hair. She said it was impossible.

So Lady Daventry went to the fancy dress ball at the Embassy with her red-gold mantle flowing round her, and created an enormous furore, for as her gay old husband with all the virility of youth whirled her round in the dance, her hair streamed out like golden rain. The ex-beauty, totally

forgotten, went home before the dance had ended, and tearing off the many aids to her own coiffure, danced on them and swore. Her day was done.

Yet this woman was much kinder to Lady Daventry than was Lady Daventry to the world at large, for she only attacked "bodies"; Lady Daventry dissected souls, and dragged out all that they thought was hidden, all that was weak or ridiculous, pitiful, or vicious, making a ruthless jest of these things.

"It's the same world after all," she said to her husband, "the world of pretence." She never found much good in the souls she vivisected; but then she never looked for any, and the hidden things were so much more amusing. Her cynicism delighted in the tearing off of cloaks, the rending of veils, and no man, and few women, could be long in her company before her uncanny gift for reading the worst of mankind had discovered the joints in their armour.

"A good enough world," answered Lord Daventry; "I am less ready than ever to leave it, I assure you, my dear."

"You are not going to leave it for many a long year," she returned, setting her lips as if her will was strong enough to keep even Death at bay, "and I have written to say we are not going to the Dalstons to-night. You were tired after yesterday though you would not own it, and I would much rather stay quietly at home and talk. I want to know more about Daventry." She could never hear enough about the home she had not yet seen.

So they stayed at home, finding a great delight in each other's companionship, though at other times they would join with equal zest in every amusement. It was all fresh and delightful to her, and looking at life through her eyes, he grew strangely younger day by day.

In the spring they returned for the London Season, the bride very determined to hold her own, and take a first place in the great world. She expected certain obstacles, and she found them: had it been too easy she would have valued her triumph less, for from the moment she entered a great ball-room where Royalty was present, clad with the most exquisite simplicity, and without one ornament upon her, save only the shining jewel of her own youth and incomparable hair, it was all triumph.

36 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

There was many a resentful Society mother with eligible daughters determined to teach the country parson's daughter "her place." She taught them theirs, and her husband chuckled delightedly. No one ever attempted to snub the new Lady Daventry twice, and many recognised in her a power and came quickly into line.

"Better have Lady Daventry as friend than enemy," said one to explain her own quick volte face, "she's uncannily clever, my dear, and she has a knack for finding out about one just that sort of thing one would prefer to have unknown. I can foresee the day when the shutting of Lady Daventry's door will mean social extinction. She is not going to make any mistakes; you will always find Lady Daventry on the right side."

Then came the approval of Royalty, and Lady Daventry's social fortune was made. Royalty had found her not only beautiful, but modest and dignified, in every sense of the word one fitted to take her place as "a great lady." Coldly gracious always, she was never frivolous; amorous youth, and middle-age too, sighed in vain. She was obviously uninterested even while she took their admiration as her right, and at all times her attitude to her husband was perfect and unaffected. People scoffed at her "hypocrisy," for she seemed actually to love her old husband, and said how cunning she was. They did not realise that this affection was entirely genuine, and founded on affinity as well as gratitude, and the one affection of her life.

She had countless acquaintances, and no friends. She never sought a friend, for the man she had married was that, and more, to her. They understood each other perfectly, even to the realising of each other's limitations.

Lord Daventry only shrugged his shoulders and laughed when Lady Daventry barred her doors to all of smirched reputation, and pointed out that many of these were pleasant and amusing sinners, and that they went everywhere "since they were still on the right side of the law." But Lady Daventry took her own way; such sins and such sinners were repellent to one of her temperament, and for all her cleverness, she could not understand such lives. To her they were beyond the pale, since they sinned, it seemed, for the love of sinning, and not through the goad of ambition which she could have condoned and understood. After

a little while these "pleasant sinners" found that others were following the example of "the great Lady Daventry," and that Society was growing "ridiculously strait-laced" just because one lovely woman was "too clever to be found out."

Lord Daventry became more and more proud of his lovely wife, and his love grew into an infatuation. He could deny her nothing. She was his idol, his god, his one obsession. The masterful old man who had had women at his feet all his life was caught in his own trap at last; he was no longer the master, but the slave. Many had loved him madly; in return he had loved them lightly, and passed on. He had taken as much as possible, given as little; and that little dross rather than gold. Now he gave all the concentrated love of the years, and bowed in blind worship. At times his happiness was so intense that he feared it would shorten his life; it took such toll of his emotions, and the age of the body could hardly bear the youth of the heart.

While the woman slept the long sound sleep of her youth, her husband, whose years denied him this guerdon, lay awake without regret, adoring and happy. He would think of all the men who envied him so vainly, and chuckle at their disappointment, and wrong conception of affairs. They believed the situation the usual one, the clever young wife keeping the old husband blind while she amused herself apart from him as she chose, or the virtuous girl waiting patiently for release, counting the months till she should be free to seek a mate fit for her years. And they were wrong, and always would be wrong! His darling loved him, was happiest in his company; she gave him all, heart, soul, wonderful intellect, youth, and gave them gladly. He alone held the key to her nature, for him alone the treasure-store.

As she slept, very gently so as not to awaken her, he would steal a little closer that her breath should fan his cheek, and twist a long silken plait round fingers that trembled even at touch of her hair, and draw its golden magic across his lips, murmuring over and over again, "My pretty Jane, my wonderful, wonderful incomparable Jane!"

— Much as he adored her beauty, it was the keen brain he

38 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

worshipped most. He could have seen her beauty in ruins, once having loved her, and still have worshipped the woman that was left. He had never realised any woman could be as clever, as capable, as powerful. Details were nothing to her, she mastered them with an ease that was extraordinary. It was in fact genius.

Even in the midst of her brilliant season, she was for ever asking this and that about his estates, and the management of them, pondering on the ins and outs of such management, getting her grasp on the ways and the means.

"My dear, you are a commercial genius, a financier lost to the world!" he said one day, after an exhaustive catechism.

"It seems to me that if a rent-roll can bring in so much, it can be made to bring in more," she returned.

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "I daresay, but Bruce is a dreamer and well content; and after all it's his business."

Lady Daventry's lips tightened. "Not in your lifetime," she said tensely.

"But he gets as much out of it as any of them ever did."

"He should get more," she retorted. "Any fool can keep what he has, and only a fool is content to; others increase their stake, and go on increasing it. The parable of the ten talents is as true to-day as the day it was written. That's what opportunity means. That's what I should like to do with Daventry."

"Well," he hesitated a little, then his mouth set grimly, "we will not put our talents out to usury, you and I, my dear," he said, "the tenant's interests must not suffer, there can be no raising of rents, nothing of that sort."

"I should not suggest it. That sort of thing only pays for the time being; it is a short-sighted policy. Mine was, literally, the policy that builds for the future." She took out the map of the property, bent intent brows over it. "Look, Lionel dear, this long belt along the sea-coast, without a single house on it, not even fit for pasture, returning you not a penny."

"My darling, it's just miles of sand-hills!"

"It's more than that, Lionel, it's a mine of wealth. Don't you see?"

"I confess I do not."

"But it's so simple, the sort of thing that must occur to everybody."

"Which is exactly the simple obvious thing that occurs to nobody," he chuckled. "Well, what is your suggestion?"

"If Bruce Daventry is your agent he should have thought of it, suggested it; it was his duty!" she cried with resentment. "Look at Hoylake!"

"The golf course?"

"Exactly! We'll have our Hoylake too, and a fortune! You've got your stone-quarries close by, and there's this long strip on the coast with two big manufacturing towns each side of it. It'll be the best links anywhere! At first the houses shall be a good way apart, so as to populate it right along the belt, then we'll fill in between and between, make a big town of it; a bank, and a church will follow."

"So you are minded to found a city, fair wife?"

"A fortune!" she cried, her cheeks flushing with pleasure, "and oh! there will be such joy in the making! The houses shall be good value, good value always pays in the long run, charming within and without. You will let me design them with the help of an architect? I love that sort of thing. I have been reading books on house-building, they are quite fascinating. Lionel, you will own a flourishing increasing town."

"I shall be dead, my dear, owning nothing but my heritage of six-foot-three. Bruce will own your city."

"Oh no, oh no! He shan't! He won't!" She shook her husband's arm almost angrily. "You shall not say such things, Lionel, you who will live for years and years! You will see our town grow up day by day. It shan't cost you too much, a few houses to start with: then you can let the land or sell it to builders, or there are mortgages, many ways. I have not gone into all that yet. We will call it something pretty, 'Siversands' or something like that. We will make a bid for the young married couples. We will send illustrated circulars with houses and links to the inhabitants of the towns close by; we will get posters out, 'Why not live on a healthy golf-course? It will cost you less,' and that sort of thing. We'll have tenants waiting three or four deep for every house that's built, you'll see. They really will be cheap, and seem even cheaper than they are!"

40 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"Oh, my financial Jane!" chuckled the old man. Such things did not interest him overmuch. He loved his library, music, the whole world of art, which world was an uninteresting book whose leaves were left uncut, as far as Lady Daventry was concerned. "I'll leave it to you and Bruce," he said. "You'll have to cross swords with him to get your own way. He is very conservative, quite content with fifty thousand a year, and will object to any innovation. You will have to fight him in his dual capacity, that of agent and heir. Even for you I will not dismiss him. His father died in debt, and Bruce is a beggar, and a proud beggar. He would not accept his allowance as my heir; he insisted on earning it. So he went to an agricultural college, gained good certificates, then spent a year under my late agent. Now Bruce, though he's only twenty-four, manages everything, and manages it well. Your scheme will cost a lot of money, more than he will want to put up, and he is not very keen about house-property. In fact we have sold a good deal, and results justified the sale. He's not much of a sportsman, and far too fond of scribbling, but he's very far from being a fool, my dear. If he had it in him to become a great writer I would say nothing, but he hasn't. He will have to content himself with being merely the eleventh Lord Daventry."

Lady Daventry's eyes narrowed, but she said nothing. Already she hated Bruce, the usurper, with a great hatred, and had sworn to conquer him, to dash his hopes to the ground; somehow, some day, this thing should be accomplished.

It was true enough that Bruce Daventry rather fell between two stools. There were those who complained that he was too much agent and too little heir, and others who said he was too much heir, and not sufficiently the agent. His uncle objected because he was neither entirely agent nor entirely heir, and an amateur ink-slinger without force, brilliance, or wit. Many of the Daventrys had been distinguished, if dilettante, litterateurs; Lord Daventry had it in him to be great, and as a critic had few equals. He did not object to his nephew writing, but he objected very strongly to what he wrote.

"There is only one excuse," he said ironically, "and that is, genius. Nothing less is worth it, either to itself or to the world."

Bruce contested this idea hotly. His face flushed as he enumerated names of those who had possessed great talent only, had much joy in creation, and had given much to the world. "Would you have us a dumb nation?" he demanded.

"Not dumb," retorted Lord Daventry, "but a damned sight dumber!"

"One goes on trying, and one improves!" cried the young man passionately.

"Passion, wisdom, creative force, the power of mystery or colour, are allotted in the hour of birth, and can neither be learned nor simulated," quoted Lord Daventry, "and that was written by a man who knew, and had the right to speak. In that natal hour is genius given or withheld, my boy, even talent with which you profess to be content. For you it was not given, but withheld. The sooner you realise this, the better for your happiness and satisfaction. You can be a passable Lord Daventry; you cannot be even a passable writer. The thing simply isn't there. Ungifted you cannot excel, neither can you learn. You can be one of the little inanities, one of the almost-successes, any fool can be that, but you cannot be anything worth while."

"I will prove that you are wrong," said Bruce, his face very pale. His uncle's whip had been a whip of scorpions. Yet in his way the old man had been cruel to be kind. He had seen such tragedies before; he did not want Bruce to be another of them: the boy was too good for that.

"To be successful one must first realise one's limitations," he said kindly.

"I try and learn," Bruce answered, walking away rather stiffly.

His uncle looked after him with a shrug of his shoulders. "A tragedy or a comedy?" he asked himself. "A passionate love of creative art, and impotence! Poor devil, he cannot realise it, he never will realise it! It's just as well the thing will never have to stand to him for a living, and that his lines are cast in pleasant places."

"Bruce is a rum chap," he said to his wife, "I sometimes wonder if I understand him as well as I think I do. Can realist and idealist ever understand each other?"

"What did he think of your marriage?" she asked. She

42 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

had always wanted to know that, but somehow she had not asked before.

"He was careful not to say, with his lips. His eyes were not complimentary to either of us, my dear. He thinks me a hoary-headed old sinner, and I should not like to say what he thinks of you. He takes your father's view. That's the sort he is, and at twenty-four! He was meant for a saint or a monk, but who knows but that the world, the flesh, and the devil won't have their way yet? When an idealist falls, he falls far. I wish I knew Adam Ffiffe was to reign in my stead. He's strong, the other's weak; he's clever, the other only thinks he is. I wonder what will happen when Adam's eyes are open. He idolises his mother as a white dove, and she's more than a little smirched."

"I wish you would not take it for granted I shall have no son," burst out Lady Daventry. "Why not, why not? I am a member of a very large family, healthy, young!"

"But I am old," he said quietly, "and even my youth could not bring me a son."

"More unlikely things have happened," she persisted, and stated a case well known to both of them.

Lord Daventry smiled unpleasantly. "The boy is oddly unlike his very ancient father," he laughed. "I have traced another, and much more marked, resemblance."

Lady Daventry turned away a face hot with disgust. "How horrible!" she exclaimed. "Don't! That sort of thing makes me sick!"

"I was only explaining a seeming miracle, showing it no great miracle after all. But you will remain in power a few years longer, I feel good for another twenty to-day. You don't want to hurry the exit? Sure?" He placed an arm round her shoulders.

"I want you to live for ever, for as long as I do!" she cried almost passionately. "I cannot think of my life without you! It will be so horribly lonely. Oh Lionel, why not to a hundred? It has been done." She grasped his hand urgently.

"Not by such as I, my dear. I've been living hard for close on sixty years, enjoying myself to the utmost, never just existing. It's the vegetables who live on and on, though for them it can hardly be worth while to have lived

at all. There must be a limit ; still, we'll try for ninety, eh ? " He laughed, and kissed her hair.

" Then we will go home at once, I am longing to see Daventry," she said eagerly, " and I know I shall love the cold and craggy north and your grim old castle. You will let me have a free hand in the management of the estate ? You have no idea how quick I am at learning about things in which I am interested. You will not join forces with the enemy against me ! " She laughed confidently.

" The enemy ! Oh, you mean Bruce ! You shall have my support, and I will watch the fight with joy ; but, my dear, is it wise to make an enemy of the future Lord Daventry ? "

" I will risk it," she said rather grimly. " I expect he hates me already."

" And you return his hate with interest, eh ? Well, I shan't need to be jealous of the handsome young nephew at my gates ! "

" You know you need never be jealous of anybody, certainly of no man."

" And of nothing, fair wife ? " He looked at her keenly.

" My ruling passion is ambition, but what is there left to gain ? You have given me everything, therefore there can be no rival. Are you content, my husband ? "

" Content is a very small word for a very big thing," he returned. " I am happy beyond all dreams of happiness. We will go home the first day you please, but are you already tired of your triumphs ? "

" What is there left to gain ? " she asked.

" What a typical speech ! You would seek pastures new, and find other worlds to conquer ? So you shall, my dear, so you shall, and you shall cross swords with Bruce without loss of time. I think I can name the victor."

" Yes," she answered without any doubt, but to herself she said, " Victor for a year or two, and afterwards . . . "

A few days later they left for Daventry, and one sight of that ancient stronghold, Daventry Castle, proudly aloof on a high hill, its grey, gaunt battlements fronting the North Sea, its pleasure stretching for miles around, its magnificent avenues sheltered from the fierce sea-wind, and its historic treasures, was enough, more than enough,

44 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

for the third Lady Daventry. She loved it, as those other wives had not had it in them to love it, more than her husband whose ancestral pride stretched back for hundreds of years, more than Bruce who had another god, more than anything in the world. It became her ruling passion, her whole desire. The discordant cry of the peacocks, the beating of the sea winds, lashing at the castle that had stood like a rock for generations, the grim glint of the sea, held her with a power that would not let go.

It dispossessed all other love ; she still loved her husband as she had always loved him, but she loved Daventry more.

CHAPTER IV

THE WELCOME OF THE LISTER TWINS

“Greetings where no kindness is . . .”—WORDSWORTH.

THE village was en fête for the arrival of Lord and Lady Daventry, gay greetings, respectful greetings, admiring greetings, met the bride on every hand. There was a brass band, there was a mayor with an address, and decorations shining in the sun. Lady Daventry could not complain of her welcome.

Yet there were two discordant notes. There was the heir who met them at the station, most courteous, most cold, a young man curiously like and yet curiously unlike her husband, whom she would have known among a multitude for Bruce Daventry. There was no mistaking the Daventry type.

His welcome lacked nothing of outward respect and deference for his uncle's lovely young wife ; still she knew instantly that in his heart there was neither respect nor admiration for her, but a contempt that brought the blood to her face, and hot hatred to her slow pulses. He thought of her as her dead father had thought of her.

However, she took his greeting with exquisite courtesy. Standing back with a little gasp, Bruce Daventry realised how a smile could be a smile, and yet a sword.

Lord Daventry smiled too ; he saw the naked sword in the grasp of both, saw it flash in the sun, and the sight amused him. His old age was to be full of zest.

He laughed aloud when at last they were in their carriage, and being driven quickly along the beautiful old roads.

“Why do you laugh ? ” she asked.

“Because I am still young enough to enjoy a fight, my dear,” he answered.

46 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

As they passed the vicarage, a crowd of tangled heads stared over the hedge at the new Lady Daventry, and two, the smallest, one very dark, one very fair, one lovely, one ugly, balanced perilously over the top of a rickety old gate.

"Here she is!" cried Meg Lister.

"Here she is!" echoed Dorothea, her twin.

As Lady Daventry looked up, two tongues were put out at her, two rather grubby thumbs were put to two noses.

"Yah!" they cried together.

Meg went one better than her imitative sister. She used a coarse expression picked up in the village.

The carriage drove quickly on, and the episode was past. Lord Daventry lay back laughing immoderately, but Lady Daventry with a shudder of disgust took out her handkerchief.

"The little horrors!" she exclaimed.

"Rather hungry little horrors, I fear!" Lord Daventry stopped laughing, his brow wrinkled. "They haven't had a chance since the late Lady Daventry's death; she was their god-mother. Jane, couldn't you do something for them?"

"I! After this!" She shook her handkerchief at him, her face inexorable. In all the years that were to come, during all she was yet to suffer at Meg Lister's hands, she never forgot, or forgave, that first insult. No excuse, no explanation, could move her. And the word the child used, unconscious of its meaning but knowing it was somehow dreadful, had fallen on her like a blow. Such a word for a woman with her icy disgust for all that side of life, her detachment from it! Nothing, so long as she lived, would ever wipe the insult of it away.

"My dear, they did not understand, and there are wheels within wheels. Bruce is behind this."

Her eyes glittered. "I think he is behind too much," she said.

"Oh, I don't mean he knew, he would be very angry with them, very shocked, but they are his champions. They realise that you may injure him from a worldly point of view. Servants talk, and they live with servants, talk like them, think like them. Depend upon it they have heard, 'Now Mr. Bruce may find his nose put out of joint.'"

WELCOME OF THE LISTER TWINS 47

Lady Daventry's hand opened and shut, but she did not speak.

"They are devoted to Bruce and he to them, his slaves, or he theirs, either or both. You see they thought they were helping to fight his battles, for his rights; shocking, and yet human! They've been brought up under rather awful conditions. After the death of the second Lady Daventry, there was nobody to do anything for them. They are five years old now and have deteriorated sadly. Their mother was a refined sensitive gentlewoman: their father is—" he spread out his hands hopelessly. "Their step-mother? Well, she came to the vicarage as that strange being known as a 'lady-help.' It is said that, impossible as it might seem, she was even less of a lady than a help. Anyway she married the widower, dislikes his children, has several of her own to feed and clothe, and there you are! There isn't much to be had, but what there is, is naturally kept jealously for her own offspring. The twins come off very badly indeed, they play with the villagers, and are scarcely fit for polite society, therefore they are practically outcasts. Bruce is mother, God, and provider-in-chief to them. I hear he even buys them boots and frocks and other necessities of existence."

"Always Bruce," said Lady Daventry slowly.

"If you had seen fit to take up the late Lady Daventry's work in the matter of the twins, I should have been pleased."

"Not even for you to whom I owe everything! After what has passed how can you expect it?"

"I did not expect it," he answered regretfully. "Very well, my dear, they must remain in the gutter, and that's the end of it."

"Oh, the great Bruce will see they don't do that!" She laughed sneeringly.

"Their step-mother at least won't. She's a very dreadful woman, such a contrast to the last wife, but good enough for Lister, though I believe he thinks, and says, otherwise. She is one of those people who possess the comfortable conviction that all misfortunes that happen to others are for the best, provided always they happen to others."

"Oh, we 'bear each other's burdens' lightly and easily

48 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

enough, don't we?" retorted Jane. "And the first wife was different, you say?"

"So different one can't speak of them in the same breath. China and base metal is too poor a contrast. How she came to marry Lister no one has ever been able to understand."

Perhaps the first Mrs. Lister had not altogether understood herself. She married the man for what she believed him to be, even cared for him very much at first, then slowly, but surely, her eyes had to open to his selfishness, his coarseness, his cruelty. His egoism was amazing; his snobbishness, meanness, and hypocrisy extraordinary. It was then however too late to repent, and she held bravely by her bargain.

Eleven times she encountered the curse of Eve, not easily, for she was a delicate highly-strung woman, but at least valiantly. Indeed her high courage was only excelled by that of her husband at such times. He held it her duty and her privilege, and quoted the Bible as his authority. She never contradicted him or complained, or spoke of a burden greater than she could bear.

But there came a twelfth time, when the latest baby was only a little over ten months old. When the twins were born, Mrs. Lister did not make that effort required of her as a Christian and a woman, but closed glad eyes on Holy Matrimony.

Her friends said it was "the last straw": her husband spoke of the Hand of God, and preached a very touching sermon on submission to the Divine Will, for though Mr. Lister did not bother to "practise," his preaching was both excellent and eloquent, and always filled his church.

People thought he might have waited a little longer before marrying again, but he pointed pathetically to the helpless, motherless twins, and once more submitted himself to the Will of God.

The lady-help was not pretty, but she had yellow hair, blue eyes, and a determined disposition. He therefore married her to be a mother to his children, and if she preferred to be a mother to her own, surely no one, Mr. Lister least of all, could have anticipated that eventuality?

The twins did quite cheerfully without a mother, though a little less cheerfully without enough to eat. Ugly, skinny

Margaret saw that the path of lovely, plump Dorothea was as smooth as possible. Dorothea seemed born for the easy way.

Her father called her Dorothea because she was the gift of God.

Her brothers and sisters however shortened this name in rather brutal fashion, and even Bruce had to remind himself not to use their nickname, and sometimes remembered too late. Mrs. Lister used it too, looking down on the exquisite owner with open aversion.

As a matter of fact she had an inordinate jealousy of her predecessor, and, above all, of her predecessor's children. Even long years of body and soul sickness did not entirely destroy the first Mrs. Lister's beauty: a certain attraction, a certain distinction, survived to the bitter end.

Some of the sons had taken after their plebeian-looking, if fine, handsome father, but Mrs. Lister's beauty, and better still, her distinction, had been handed down to her numerous daughters. Margaret it was true seemed alien, and ugly; dark, skinny, sallow; but even Meg had a "something" that the second Mrs. Lister's children did not possess, a flash of personality, of breeding. The present Mrs. Lister's golden hair, already faded, her pale-blue soulless eyes, were her sole claims to looks. Her features were thick and common, her skin bad, her figure worse. Her children were plain and common-looking too.

In justice to Mr. Lister it must be added that he proposed to three pretty, young, and refined women, before, in a moment of angry astonishment at his rejections, he had come down to her.

Then it was common knowledge that he had been "in love" with his first wife, very much in love in his way. It was odd to think anyone should have such a bitter corroding envy of the first Mrs. Lister as her successor had.

Mr. Lister solacing himself with the lady-help, told himself that any of the women he had asked to marry him would have jumped at the chance had it not been for the too-numerous family, and so healed the wound to his pride. But he was not above "taking it out" of his wife. She was not quite his own class, she was very far from belonging

50 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

to the class of his first wife, and when he was annoyed he let her know it.

It was a bad household to rear children in. It added neither to their chances of moral or social good. Miss Lister, the strong-minded, and much younger, sister of Mr. Lister, was rather horrified at what she saw during her flying visits. But she had her own work, her independence in London, and took her novelette-writing rather seriously. She did not come often, and when she did, she and her brother wrangled half the time, so that her visits led to little good beyond gifts of money and clothes to the children. Devoted to the twins as she was, Mr. Lister held that his sister's ideas were loose and lax, and there had been such plain-speaking during her last visit that it was unlikely she would return soon, if ever.

So that the coming of the third Lady Daventry found things in a very hopeless condition at the vicarage. Lord Daventry was interested in children, even fond of them, and had hoped his wife would do something for the twins. However it was not to be, and he dismissed the possibility from his mind. It did not occur to him to insist, nor to take matters into his own hands. He never guessed that though his wife would have none of them by choice, yet she was to have a great deal of them by necessity, and that their fates and her fate were curiously intermingled.

"Well, perhaps they will swim, not sink," he said lightly. "Anyway there is Bruce, and perhaps he would not care to divide the honour of their upbringing, or brook your appearance in their affairs."

The carriage swept round a curve and the magnificent castle of the Daventrys frowned down upon them. "Look, that is your home, my darling," said the old man.

Lady Daventry looked up with a start, then she sat leaning forward and the colour drained slowly from her face, while her hands closed fiercely. "Mine," she whispered, "mine!"

The joy and pride of her possession was fresh upon her a few days later, when driving, they came upon Bruce leaving a long low house set in a hollow at the corner of the cross-roads.

They stopped for a minute to greet the heir, then Lady

Daventry turned to her husband, and asked idly, "What house is that?"

"The Dower House," he returned.

Lady Daventry looked at it and her eyes were very hard. She disliked it instinctively. It was set in a hollow and close to the cross-roads; the dust of carriages and constant passing lay against the windows, it was very old, and grim without magnificence. After Daventry Castle it was mean beyond description.

"It's not much of a place," Lord Daventry spoke almost apologetically, thinking with regret how unsuited it was to her regal beauty, "but it's served its purpose. There have been no 'Dowagers' for a very long time. At present some people from Manchester have it."

Lady Daventry did not answer. She had turned from the Dower House to look at Bruce. This was the man with the flaming sword who would bar her out of her Paradise, and her hatred rose and rose till its serpent's coils were crushing all her joy in life, and it became a thing beyond reason.

"Drive on," she said harshly to the coachman, and to herself, "I will not live in that horrible house. I will not give up the Castle; nothing, nobody shall take it from me."

CHAPTER V

THE LISTER TWINS AND THE "ORPIN"

"Children think not of what is past, nor what is to come, but enjoy the present time, which few of us do."—LA BRUYERE.

LADY DAVENTRY had no sooner passed the vicarage than another excitement was to be observed, the telegraph boy coming up to the house.

The twins, hand-in-hand, trotted inside; they were quite unconscious of fresh disaster hard upon their heels. They did not know that their sister Jenny who had run away with an Irish boy-artist, had followed her young husband to the grave, and left a penniless orphan to the world's mercy.

Mrs. Lister made no attempt to hide her fury. Another unwanted mouth to feed! She spoke disparagingly of the young parents whom it appeared had died out of spite, and even more disparagingly of the wretched orphan who had come into the world entirely to annoy her.

"As if it wasn't bad enough without orphans!" she screamed shrilly.

The twins listened aghast.

"What sort of a n'animal or a f'ing is a n'orpin?" demanded the fair sister of the dark, her big blue eyes fearful.

But even Meg the know-all did not know that: she only thought it sounded nasty. "There'll be room in the stable or the hen-house," she said soothingly. "It can't get at us then if we keep the door shut."

"Will it be like Orphy, always sittin'?" enquired Dorothea anxiously, for the Buff Orpington so called was rather given that way.

The climax came when Mrs. Lister announced that the

LISTER TWINS AND THE "ORPIN" 53

"orpin" would have to sleep in the tiny bedroom occupied by the twins. With a howl of terror and dismay they fled hot-foot to Bruce.

"S'pose it pecks off our noses when we're asleep?" wailed Dorothea.

"S'pose it has to be fed!" lamented Margaret.

For the feeding was already inadequate. When there wasn't enough to go round, it was not Mrs. Lister's own children who suffered. "A live ass is sometimes better than a dead lion, and its cubs too," said the second Mrs. Lister grimly.

The children's short legs took them at a remarkably fast speed to Bruce. They burst upon him, they had the "open sesame" of the agent's house, as he sat moodily in his library, his unlighted pipe in his hand.

"We've got a n'orpin comin'," wailed Dorothea as the child flung herself across his knees, and stifled her lamentations against his waistcoat.

"Dosé, what do you mean?"

"Not Dosé," the victim of her brothers' and sisters' habit of shortening all names as seemed good to them, cried with a louder wail. "As if I was Pains or Gregory, and you pwomised!"

"I beg your pardon, Dorothea," said the young man humbly. "It just slipped out. I will try and remember. Now what is the trouble?"

"A n'orpin, by the telegramt boy," explained Meg.

"Always sittin' an' peckin'," complained Dosé, her golden head retreating further into his waistcoat.

"Pot eggs," wailed Margaret. "What's the good of pot eggs?" she demanded.

"Tut, tut! Dear me!" said the young man hopelessly, unearthing more sweets. "Explanations" only puzzled him the more. He disliked Mrs. Lister, but even he did not believe her capable of putting something between a fiend and a hen to sleep with the twins.

"What has Orphy been doing now?" he asked.

"It's another Orphy, a worse one, a n'orpin-fing. The Woman is awful angwy." They always spoke of their step-mother in this fashion behind her back, though Bruce had done his best to cure them.

His soft heart ached for the poor babies and their lot in

life, and he did his best, in a foolish, ignorant way, to alleviate them. He gave them things to eat, very often the wrong sort of things, and he bought them boots and clothes, also the wrong sort of boots and clothes, for if the twins were but five he was but twenty-four and they were his first experience of children.

He was not without his reward. Meg was not a specially loving or sweet-natured child, rather the reverse, since she had had early to learn to fight not only for herself but for the meeker Dosé, but in her way she was fond of him, and Dosé wholly and utterly adored him. He was her god, much superior to the God she was commanded to worship. He never gave them things to eat when they were hungry, though they had politely asked him to drop a parcel of cakes and sweets through the open skylight in their room; but when did Bruce ever fail them? His cupboard was never bare, and though sometimes, going home, they were exceedingly ill, after the prodigal feasts he had made for them, they were grateful just the same, and never mentioned the consequences to a soul.

"We sawed the new lady," said Meg inconsequently. "Nasty ugly fing, we fought. You don't like her eiver, do you? What has she come to live wiff your old urcle for? Did the lord ask her?"

"We will give her that much credit," returned Bruce, smiling unwillingly.

"Why did she go?"

"He used that unanswerable argument called L. S. D. and a few other arguments doubtless."

"I foughted her lovely though ugly too," said Dosé, unable to explain her own meaning. "We putted out our tongues," she added proudly.

"And me called her . . ." And Meg mentioned the dreadful word.

Bruce started in horror. "Oh Meg, surely not!" he gasped. "Now listen, if ever you use such a low, nasty, vile word again, or behave in the rude, disgusting way you've told me about, I won't be your friend any longer. I shall be too ashamed of you, do you understand?"

At this awful prospect there was a united and piercing wail; then Meg tossed her head. "I hate her, and I shall call her . . ." and again she uttered the unspeakable word.

"Very well, Meg." The young man carried her kicking and struggling into the road, and shut the front door. "Good-bye, I am sorry I can't be your friend any more."

When he returned, Dosé crept into his arms and begged and wept that Meg might be forgiven. But she did not offer to share the banishment as Meg would have done in like case.

"Then she must apologise and promise what I ask," he said sternly.

Meg did not apologise or actually promise; she crept through the window, and a low little whimper by his side discovered her at his elbow. "I won't say it loud out ever again," she whispered, "I'll just say it inside when I see her."

"Unless you will forget that word I cannot be friends," he returned inexorably.

"All right," she said, and climbing on his knee put her thin arms round his neck, and sobbed contrition on his crumpled shirt-front. The twins were responsible for an unreasonable number of shirts in the wash each week. They had been known to ruin three a day, when things had gone very badly at the vicarage.

"I can never forget nuffin'," said the child of too-excellent memory to her twin as they trotted homewards, "tryin' don't make any difference; you 'member it better by tryin' to forget it, I fink."

Then the maid-of-all-work, Susan, descended upon them, and had fearful and appalling intelligence to bestow. The "orpin" had already arrived, and was that "very instant-minute" on the children's bed, and "God-bless-me, I never seed one like it!" she informed them all in one breath. Then she rushed away to collect the herd of elder children, who, wild, mischievous, and rebellious, were never to be found when wanted. Of the grown-up, or growing-up ones, Jenny the eldest was dead at twenty-two. Another girl was married abroad, the third and fourth were "in situations," though Lucy was little more than a child herself; then came the crowd of boys, ranging from six to sixteen, the twins, and the second family of babies from three to one. There would be another very shortly, and it certainly was not the best time for a juvenile

visitor. There was nobody to look after the twins; therefore the twins would have to look after the orphan.

Far from looking after him, the terror-struck children were too frightened even to go and make his acquaintance. They decided to take refuge in the coal-cellar.

"But the Woman always finds us!" wailed Dosé.

Meg battled with terror and burning curiosity, and curiosity won. She dragged the reluctant Dosé behind her, and entered the attic bedroom.

The despicable orphan was sitting bolt upright on the bed, his flaming hair on end, his freckled face puckered up as he wondered what had become of that person known as mummy. He was two years of age. Even in this moment of grief he was a comical-looking child, round and red and blunt-featured, with flat nose, wide mouth, and vivid carrot-hair. His father had been a handsome lad, his mother a lovely girl, but the orphan was hideous. Everybody but his mother, who had thought him beautiful, said so. If he was sad, he was angry too. The person who had taken him upstairs and had plopped him heavily and impatiently on the bed, bidding him "go to sleep at once, mind!" had never asked if he was hungry, and hunger happened to be his chronic condition.

He promptly prepared for the howl that would bring his mother flying to his side, but paused with it arrested. Two pairs of eyes were peering at him, and he recognised others of his kind. His baby aunts were only three years his senior.

"Why, it's a baby!" cried the amazed Dosé. "But what a ugly baby. Like a fwog!"

The orphan glared. He seemed to recognise disparagement.

"It's a n'orpin just the same," declared Meg relentlessly, "anover 'spense, an' it'll want fings to eat!"

"Fings to eat," echoed Dosé anxiously, and her lovely face fell.

"Orpins don't aserve fings to eat," said Meg more hopefully.

The orphan, his tenderest feelings hurt, raised an outraged howl. Then he stopped and proceeded to make humorous grimaces instead. What were they but girls, after all? He was going to get the smooth out of life, and go laughing

LISTER TWINS AND THE "ORPIN" 57

through it. If his parents hadn't handed down their beauty, they had left him all their optimism instead.

Meg became conscious the creature was trying to give itself airs. She planted her scraggy legs far apart. "You're a n'orpin," she accused him sternly.

"Yes, you are," agreed Dosé, nodding her head.

The orphan howled.

Mrs. Lister ran up, her peevish face flushed with rage. "How dare you wake the child up and set it crying?" she demanded shrilly, administering a loud slap to each twin. "You regular little baggage, you! Haven't I enough work, and enough trouble, but you must be ever making more? Take that, and that, and that!"

The twins "took it," each in her own way, Dorothea shrinking, Meg with defensive defiance. She got in a kick at her stepmother's thick ankles.

"You little wretch!" Mrs. Lister had perforce, as a clergyman's wife, to choke back the first word that rose to her tongue. "Your father shall give you something to remember for this!" She rubbed her smarting ankle, and then turned rather viciously on the child she hated most of all, and boxed her ears, till Meg, white, sick, and dizzy, reeled against the bed-post. "Perhaps that will teach you!" she screamed.

Meg said nothing.

"Not enough mouths to feed but that more must be introduced! Orphans indeed!" She glared at the ugly child.

He had ceased to howl to gaze upon the astonishing sight of his own kind being smacked. He had not known such things happened. He could have told much of kissings, of cosy cuddlings, but the other was something undreamed of in his philosophy. He looked at his small aunts with compassion as well as curiosity.

"Lie down!" said Mrs. Lister in her harsh, scolding voice, and proceeded to force him down, and cover him up with the bed-clothes.

A new, fearful, and yet absorbing idea, occurred to the orphan. He put it into instant execution, and his teeth met in his step-grandmother's hand.

That valiant action, in which he felt no little pride, made his aunts his friends for life. That a mere "orpin," and

58 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

such a little one, should have the courage to defy the powers that be!

He took the well-deserved smack without crying, only wondered warily where he could get another bite in. Mrs. Lister however, on her way to her husband with her bleeding hand and sore ankle, gave him no second chance.

Her tale of outrage should have roused a loving and indignant husband to action. It only irritated Mr. Lister, who demanded how on earth he was to write his sermon, and about peace and concord too, when she was for ever complaining about something or other.

"Your children are perfect devils, clergyman or no clergyman!" said the ex-lady-help shrilly, "and if any woman is to be pitied it's their poor step-mother!"

"You didn't need asking twice, scarcely once, to become their step-mother," he reminded her brutally, "and you knew what they were. You are too down on them because they are Marion's and pretty. There was no trouble as long as she lived."

Mrs. Lister melted into tears. "It's always the way, and it isn't fair," she wept, "and me in this state of health and all!"

"Well, go and lie down and keep quiet," he snapped at the unfortunate woman who had no chance to lie down and keep quiet, "only leave me in peace for goodness' sake! I work like a slave, and I'm denied an hour's quiet in my own house! Marion used to keep the place quiet."

"I don't want to hear any more about Marion, I'm sick of Marion," sniffed Mrs. Lister, "pity you didn't think more of her when she was alive!" The door shut with a loud bang.

The children, still staring at each other, heard it. "He won't do anything as long as we don't bover him," said Meg thankfully.

The three most forlorn of motherless babies slept in each other's arms that night, and from that day became inseparables.

The aunts dragged their cherished nephew on all their excursions, and might be seen continually setting him down with a breathless bump.

Orphy, as they fondly called him, knew they meant well, and bore their painful ministrations with quiet heroism.

Through the day they bumped tears into his eyes and rattled his teeth, but he rested bumpless through the night, feeling blessedly at ease when he first woke up and less at ease when he thought of the burden of the forthcoming day.

He would be dragged between his aunts, he knew only too well, o'er hill and dale, and then, when they could no more, the inevitable word would go forth.

"Set him," Meg would say, as if he were indeed the hen they had at first supposed.

And they "set" him, violently.

They hauled him to Bruce Daventry, who fed his voracity without question, but who also set him on chair, the table, or a hard floor, with a bump. Everybody bumped that stoical child as a matter of course. In after life Meg was wont to say she had supposed he liked it: it was so definite. At the vicarage he would have gone short indeed, if it had not been for the baby aunts, and Meg in particular, who went shorter themselves, and somehow satisfied the appetite of the orphan. Meg always said she looked upon orphans as beings endowed with prodigious and insatiable appetites; and quite understood that *Oliver Twist* would ask for more.

Sometimes when Bruce was away and times of famine fell upon them, there were some nightmare hours. Meg grew more hideous in her increasing scragginess, and Mr. Lister, staring at lovely Marion's one "ugly duckling," resentfully wondered who, and what, she took after. Smart Tom, who had a thick skin himself, and expected others to have a thicker, called her "Rags and Bones," which was so appropriate that the child cried herself to sleep under its cruel stigma.

"Who you take after I can't think!" observed her father one day looking up from the liberal portion on which a dozen greedy eyes were fixed. The brain worker had to be well, almost luxuriously fed, otherwise his work and sermons would suffer. There was no love lost between him and his ugly defiant daughter.

"Dessay the devil!" she retorted, for which remark she was sent supperless to bed,

CHAPTER VI

ENMITY

"Hatred is like fire . . . it makes even light rubbish deadly."
—G. ELIOT.

A FEW days after the bride's homecoming, Bruce received a summons, couched in a more peremptory form than usual, to be at his office during a certain hour.

The ready flush rose to his forehead as he turned the note over. "Her doing," he thought. "Henceforth I am to be the agent, not the heir; well, we shall see."

Punctual to the moment appointed, Lord and Lady Daventry entered the office.

His uncle greeted him carelessly, and then sank into a chair looking under his eyelids at his wife.

Lady Daventry just touched the agent's hand with her icy fingers. "I hope we are not interfering with your work, Mr. Daventry?" she said in a manner that showed very plainly that such an inconvenience would not trouble her.

"Mr. Daventry!" echoed her husband with a chuckle. "Why he's your nephew, my dear! You are his aunt, you know, and must see to it that he treats you with due respect!"

Bruce bowed formally, his face antagonistic.

"Perhaps we need not trouble about the relationship," said Lady Daventry, smiling coldly at the young man.

"After all, I do not want a 'nephew' almost as old as myself, or he an aunt of his own years. I think we might ignore that part entirely, and that it had better be 'Mr. Daventry.'"

"I think so too, Lady Daventry," agreed Bruce unsmiling. How this lovely icicle detested him, and how he detested her!

The old peer looking from one to the other chuckled. In his youth he had loved strife and warfare for the sheer excitement of it, and the thrill of victory it usually meant, but now he was a little too old, and a little too tired, to fight and hate, but not too old or too tired to enjoy a fight second-hand.

He plunged his hand deep in his pocket. "A monkey on my Lady!" he muttered to himself. "She shall have it if she wins, she loves money only second to power." He did not resent these "loves" of his wife; he could see the estate gaining, not losing, by the introduction of a penniless chatelaine.

"I am fortunate in having a wife and partner in my affairs," he said to Bruce, "who takes the greatest interest in the estate and in its management. She had asked me so many questions about it I could not answer, that in despair I brought her to you."

"I shall be delighted," said Bruce untruthfully, and fully aware it was the wife that had brought the husband, not the husband the wife. "I think I have all the ins and the outs pretty well at my fingers-ends." He turned with a confident smile to Lady Daventry. After all, he was on his own ground here, and she was out of hers; he was well up in his work, and technical details could not be known or understood by her.

But it was to these details she came swiftly, and with deep annoyance he knew he could not with justice accuse her of not understanding. She understood quite uncannily well.

He realised she was clever, very clever indeed, and yet there was something extraordinary here! Why should this penniless nobody who had achieved wealth, rank, and power, trouble about the workings of her husband's estate? In the natural course of events her interest could only be a short one. Was not her world the world of amusement, dress, Society? What had she with the brain of a man, and the interests of a specialist? How came she to the knowledge she had attained?

He knew nothing of absorbed leisure hours, spent, not with the latest novel, or any novel at all, but in the mastering of such books as he himself had had to master in his training. Once or twice she made a slight mistake, and

62 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

he had the pleasure, almost a vicious one, of correcting her, but these mistakes were at the best but trivial ones, and she never made the same mistake twice.

The masterful, clever old man sat deliberately, almost maliciously, in the background. He acknowledged this young wife as his equal, more than his equal, and was keener for her victory than he had ever been for one of his own.

Then Lady Daventry came quickly to the object of her visit, and the gauntlet, in the shape of a plan of the unused belt of sand-hills, lay on the table between them.

She explained her schemes, and they were all mapped out, quickly, even technically. "The outlay is large, I know," she concluded, "but the estate can afford it, and it can be limited if necessary. It means an ever-increasing return for the future."

"The return is already fifty thousand a year," answered Bruce coldly, "that surely is enough, without taking the risk of a big loss to increase it." He was galled by the greed, as well as the interference, of this interloper. What was it to her? She was but a "life tenant," and that tenancy not her own young life, but that of an old husband. The blood rose up to his fine arched and sensitive eyebrows.

"You think the houses would not let? But I know they would. I will guarantee to find the tenants before a brick is placed. An illustrated prospectus with the Daventry name upon it, which I am told has hitherto stood for integrity?" She looked from one man to the other.

"It has, in such matters," her husband answered.

"Then that is enough. The prospectus will be sent to every prosperous inhabitant of B— and L—, which are on each side of Silversands, as I propose to call the place, and they can become, if they will, shareholders to a limited extent. It will mean the best and nearest golf-course, for of course that must be made at once, and cheap healthy houses on the spot. Lord Daventry will agree," she had turned to Bruce, "if I get the tenants at the rents I've marked out here according to cost of each house." She pointed to a list in the mass of papers she laid before him.

He did not look at it. "People are clearing out their stake in house property, not increasing it," he said. "Do you follow the political news?"

"As far as it relates to anything in which I am interested,

You mean the latest Budget? Well, Silversands will stand it, as I think you know."

"Hitherto Daventry has been a quiet country place, immune from noise, from bustle, but if these sand-hills become 'Silversands' that peace will be at an end. We shall have a miniature Hoylake at our doors."

"Ten miles off. Are you a recluse, Mr. Daventry? Cannot you bear the sight of your fellow-creatures, even when they are making money for you?"

"Daventry has been Daventry for hundreds of years." He spoke haughtily, and as a Daventry speaking to one without traditions, or the capacity of understanding them. "Your scheme will make it merely a commercial success."

"Then you own that possibly it will be a success?"

He bit his lips, while his uncle chuckled softly to himself. "Commercially it is perhaps a good idea, and if it is my uncle's wish to become a successful business man rather than a great agricultural landlord . . ."

Again she was quick to seize upon a point in favour of her own scheme. "Agriculture! Is its prosperity increasing, or is it declining?" she demanded. "Does the grandson make what his grandfather and great-grandfather made out of the soil? Lord Daventry will, however, still be a great agricultural landlord, and landlord of town property as well. Why pay on waste land; surely that is always a false economy? I find you have farms unlet, and that those let are let at less rental than they used to be, while there are a good many leases to fall in. Will the younger generation renew them, and the struggle to make both ends meet, or will they take what money they have left, and go to Canada? When they do take on the lease afresh will they take it at the same terms; will anybody? Surely a miniature Hoylake, and the best golf-course within three counties, for it is going to be that, at our gates, will provide a market for many of the farmers, perhaps bring us rich tenants ready to buy or rent some of the farms, and turn them into country houses with handsome grounds. Look at the rich manufacturers, coal-owners and so forth close to us! You speak of Daventry bringing in fifty thousand a year, but that is including other properties owned by Lord Daventry, and the rents of Daventry Street in London,

64 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

which is the bigger portion. Even here it is not the farms that bring you wealth, but your stone and slate quarries, and these quarries will mean good and cheap building. The Silversands foundations are stone and sand, and there are the Beacons Woods close where thinning is required. The houses will cost you the minimum to put up, and your percentage will be high. The town with handsome streets will follow, an hotel overlooking the water, a promenade. Ten years hence you will have your tenants waiting two and three deep for each house likely to become empty ! ”

Her coldness had vanished, her imagination saw this thing as she had planned, and saw it truly. Her eyes flashed, and turned sparkling from one man to the other.

“ Ten years hence,” sighed Lord Daventry to himself, “ and I am seventy-six.”

“ Ten years hence,” she repeated to herself, and a fierce pang assailed her, grief, frustration of her power. What would she have to do with Silversands ten years hence ? She could build, but she could not enjoy. She was building for the man she hated ! She would be the beggar at the gates, just a “ has-been ” in the hateful mean old Dower House ; her enemy would be the richest peer in England, and it would have been her work !

The triumph went out of her face and it grew pale and bitter. She was forever coming up against the limitation of her power. To-day so much, to-morrow so little !

“ Then I think that is settled,” she said, and moved to the door. “ I will leave my papers with you, Mr. Daventry. Doubtless you will find points for correction.”

Bruce opened the door for her, and with a formal inclination of her head she passed out, and waited for her husband. She had won as she knew she must. When had she ever failed, pitted against the brain or the will of a man ? But the victory was bitter to the taste.

“ Well ? ” Lord Daventry looked keenly at his nephew. “ So you and her ladyship are to be kin and less than kind ! What do you think of my choice, eh ? ”

Bruce, goaded beyond endurance by what had passed, and by something in his uncle's eyes and tones, for there was nothing in the actual words to object to, lost his hot temper and said an unpardonable thing.

"I suppose you've got what you paid for," he returned, "beauty and youth, and brains."

Lord Daventry's face darkened. He could not bear that any should seek to disparage his idol, and Bruce's tone disparaged her, put her on a low level, and also seemed to hint that such a clever young woman might prove too clever for her old husband in the end. "If you were half as clever as the woman I have married," he said curtly, "or even if you were a little clever, you would realise that the elements that go to the making of the usual May and December marriage of exchange and barter are lacking here. We are friends and companions. I love her with every love that a man may give to a woman," he spoke fiercely, "and she loves me and me alone. No young man ever has, and ever could, appeal to her."

Bruce's face was openly sceptical. "At least permit me to apologise for my unforgivable remark," he said.

"I forgive, and I forget it, my boy. It does not touch me, you see." He laughed happily, then he looked again at his nephew's transparent face. "Ah, you think I am content because I give so much and ask so little! Wrong again, my boy! And apart from everything else youth and beauty are not little things, the farther one stands away from them oneself the greater they appear, and there are brains the magnitude of which you cannot realise, I do not know if I quite realise myself, thrown in, and a perfect ideal companionship. Do you young men find it easy to get these things in your wives?"

"I am glad you are happy, uncle."

"But you hate the woman who makes me so?"

"She hates me."

"She has beaten you, that is it, I think. She is so clever, too clever for anyone but me. Listen to me, Bruce, I am too old for personal enmity, and after all I cannot, I fear, prevent you succeeding me. I dare not hope for a son." He stopped abruptly.

Bruce turned white. A son! He had not taken such a possibility into his calculations. The very thought of what such an unexpected calamity would portend made him catch his breath, deepened his love of Daventry. It was his inheritance, he had always looked upon it as his, loved it with a great and jealous love. To be shut out! The

66 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

very thought was unbearable. Then he remembered not only that his uncle had never had a child, but that for several generations no Daventry son had succeeded Daventry father, and that there was a prophecy one would not do so for years yet. Lord Daventry had succeeded an uncle. He would himself succeed an uncle, and since he was an only child, if he had no heir, then his young cousin, Adam Coneybeare-Ffiffe, a boy he thought a vast amount of, would follow him, and perhaps it would be to him the direct heir would come.

He pulled himself together, waited for his uncle to continue.

"Therefore you must succeed, Bruce," the old man went on with a little sigh, "and my bonny Jane will have to see another in her place, and I shan't be there to comfort her. Do not make it harder for her than you can help. You would always be just, but what I mean is something more than justice."

"I will do my best," answered Bruce with rather stiff lips.

"And let there be peace between us. We have not understood each other, or sympathised with the opposite point of view, but let that go by; doubtless we have both been wrong. If you are wise you will be friends with my wife. It is better to have her with you than against you. She is not as other women, Bruce."

To Bruce she was less than other women, one who had sold herself to an old man. His mobile lips were compressed as he answered, "She would not give me her friendship if I desired it, sir, and I do not desire it."

Lord Daventry rose. "So be it," he said regretfully. "I am too old to compel the young, only youth can do that, but you and I? The last of the Daventrys." He held out his hand.

Bruce wrung it. "Yes, we are the last," he said sadly, "there are only the Ffiffes left in with us now. Have you seen Adam lately?"

"Not just lately, but I am going to have him over. It must be one or the other of you, and the sooner Lady Daventry realises it the better for herself in the long run. She seems to think a miracle is going to intervene at the last to save her, but the age of miracles is past. Adam has

it in him to be somehow great. I do not think you can be great, Bruce," he laid his hand kindly on the young man's shoulder, "but you are at least an honourable man as our world counts such things. The Daventry honour will always be safe in your hands."

Then he went outside to join the young wife waiting in the sunshine.

CHAPTER VII

LORD DAVENTRY MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

"I was left a trampled orphan . . ."—TENNYSON.

THE twins were dragging the orphan on a visit to Bruce, when, turning the corner, they spied Lord Daventry advancing in their direction.

"The lord!" announced Dosé.

"Hullo!" said Meg casually, as the old man took off his hat with an elaborate sweeping bow.

"Hullo!" he returned with a pleasant smile. He often spoke to the twins, who amused him. Then his eyes fell on the red-haired comical-looking infant. "What's that?" he demanded. "Yet another baby?"

"A n'orpin," corrected Dosé gravely. "Orphy, this is the lord." Satisfied with her introduction she helped to set down the child with the usual bump.

"Where does it live when it's at home?"

"In our bed."

"Does your stepmother own it?" he asked puzzled.

"Oh no, she can't bear orpins."

"A poor relation, is that it? Heaven help him!"

"What's heaven?" asked Meg, more out of habit than because she didn't know.

Lord Daventry shrugged his shoulders. Meg always asked him questions, usually questions he could not answer. "Nobody knows," he replied, "some of us don't care. You don't grow any better-looking, and you're too intelligent for an embryo woman, my dear; it's only the unthinking, the unfeeling, and the rather foolish who get through life easily. You will not escape, big-eyes."

"What's life?" shot Meg at him.

"Hell for some, little Miss Interrogation-mark."

"Where the debble is?"

"Oh, the devil's there all right, but it might be more unpleasant, little maid, it might be more unpleasant. They don't look as if they feared much, those big dark eyes of yours. But why be so hideous, child?" he added peevishly. "The devil takes more tender care of the beautiful, sees that they have the flesh-pots. Little Dosé now, she'll only need to be polite to his Satanic majesty, and there you are! I should like to see her grown-up. I should like to see all the lovely babies I know lovely women, but I shan't, damn it, I shan't!"

"Why shan't you if you want to?"

"Anno Domini!" laughed Lord Daventry ruefully.

"That's a funny word!"

"Very far from funny, child!"

"It's so long."

"It's the shortest word in the world, as you'll live to discover for yourself. Where are you going, by-the-bye?"

"Buce," said Dosé quickly, her face lighting up. "We fought he'd like to see the orpin, an' he gives us fings to eat."

"He isn't much to look at, your precious orphan. Perhaps he's good or clever?"

"He isn't, so there!" retorted Meg fiercely.

Lord Daventry laughed. "I meant no disparagement, fair champion."

"What's——"

"Now, now! Ask Bruce."

"Buce doesn't always know," returned Meg, "he says he doesn't."

Dosé's face flamed. "He does know, he knows everything!" she exclaimed violently.

"Then he's a genius after all! Yet I fancy it's a good thing he will never need to ask the price of his genius in Fleet Street."

"What's Fleet Street?" It was of course the ever-inquiring.

"A street paved with many contentions, broken lives, and broken hearts."

Dosé wrinkled up her divine little nose. "It sounds horrid," she decided.

But Meg looked thoughtful. "I'd like to see it," she

observed, her eyes far away. "It must look velly funny." She laughed elfishly.

Lord Daventry stared long and keenly at the speaker. "Ha!" he said suddenly. "Well, I should not wonder if you did see it one of these days, even helped to the paving thereof, Meg o' mine! But remember this, my little curiosity, to look long is to look for ever. For its true citizens there are many roads in, but never a road out!"

The three children gazed at him with eyes and mouths wide open. The orphan blew bubbles, and raked the earth for provender.

"Then you are going to desire Fleet Street, fair Margaret," he said at length, "and it's going to grind you very small in mills not known of God."

Meg's lip trembled. "I don't want to be grounded," she faltered, "it would hurt."

"You won't be able to help yourself," returned Lord Daventry, speaking musingly and to himself, "and you won't be asked. For some it is written, my infant, and what is written must be fulfilled. When I look into your eyes I read the writing on the wall from which there is no appeal. You will follow your destiny, and there's an end."

"An end of what?" asked Meg faintly, and began to tremble.

"Who knows," sighed the old man drearily, "who knows anything, even at seventy-six? Maybe the end, maybe the beginning: it's all on the knees of the gods."

The horror-struck children understood Meg's destiny was to be Heaven and awful chastisement, and burst into a panic-stricken yell, clinging together and to Lord Daventry's legs.

"Good God!" gasped the peer aghast, and put his fingers in his ears. "This is what comes of talking to babies as if they were human beings and one's contemporaries; and babies such as these are only a stomach."

He fumbled nervously in his pockets. What had he better do? Flight certainly suggested itself, as the orphan's lusty howl rose higher, but flight was a cowardly way out, and though Lord Daventry had been many discreditable things, he had never been a coward.

He looked down on the wild tangle of screaming children.

"I was only joking! Do stop!" he cried imploringly, "I didn't mean it. I am a wicked man and a liar. Nothing will ever happen to you that you don't want to happen, and that's the worst lie of all!" he added to himself. "How much money have you in your money-boxes?" He had found what he sought, and with some relief. Occasionally he came out without any money.

The terrific noise stopped as if by magic. Three pairs of eyes gleamed at him hungrily. "Buce gives us some, but it's spendid. We haven't no money."

"Well then——"

Three hot eager hands grasped three sovereigns. "Now run away and spend it," said Lord Daventry, preparing to depart.

"The lord's gived me a gold farding," said Dosé doubtfully.

"There's lots of pennies in a gold farding, isn't there, lord?" inquired Meg with shining eyes.

"So you like money, babies. I must see if I can't do something for you: one is going to be so lovely, the other so ugly. You must have a start of sorts, some independence, an education. I will think it over. Bruce may forget you in newer loves; the young have short memories."

"The orpin too!" insisted Meg, understanding something was to be given to her and Dosé, "we share wid the orpin."

"Me too!" spluttered the orphan indignantly.

"All right, all right!" agreed Lord Daventry laughing. "I must try and remember. Why shouldn't I see that you have a start? Bruce can see to the rest of it. School and college and a hundred pounds apiece at the end of it. Nothing to me; perhaps life to them! You shall have your chance, babies, see if a first-class education is enough to conquer the world with! Personally I doubt it, audacity goes farther, and, confound it! another experiment I shan't be here to see! Run away all of you and spend your money. Here's Lady Daventry coming in search of her old knight errant." He turned eyes of glad welcome towards his wife.

"The new lady is much newer-looking than the old lady," said Dosé.

72 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

Lord Daventry was delighted. "Newer-looking!" What a term for youth and beauty!

"The old lady's face was wed," said Meg, "but—but——"

"Her heart was kind?" concluded the late Lady Daventry's widower, "is that what you mean, my dear? Perhaps. And perhaps this lady's heart is cold. Yet in my eyes, and in the eyes of the world, kind hearts are not more than coronets. Her kind heart did not prevent my late wife boring me to death."

"It was the lady that died, not you," said Meg, and Lord Daventry laughed again.

"The sinner that drove the saint too far, not the saint who wore out the sinner, eh?" he returned. "Well, let that pass, and run away."

"You like the new lady bestest," said Meg ere turning to obey, "but I—I do not, and I fink her ugly."

Lady Daventry was in time to hear the last words. She gave a glance of aversion at the three grimy children, and slipped her hand through her husband's arm, gently drawing him away. "Why do you encourage the little gutter-snipes?" she asked harshly. The sight of all children incensed her. They were many of them unwanted, most of them entirely unimportant, and they were so numerous. There was no hope of any child for Daventry.

"They amuse me," he said, without mentioning the codicil he meant to add to his will. She would not miss it, but none the less would she have grudged the money so spent.

The children departed in quest of their friend and provider. Their latest boots and clothes were at the last gasp, they were hot and tired, and most dreadfully hungry. To whom else should they go?

The bump sounded on his doorstep in the first instance, then close to his feet, and looking down, the young man saw the cause of it.

His kindly, sensitive face lit up. "The dickens!" he exclaimed.

"No, the orpin," corrected Meg in severe and reproving tones.

CHAPTER VIII

HATE

"The greatest hatred, like the greatest virtue and the worst dogs, is quiet."—RICHTER.

THE tension of hatred between Bruce and his uncle's wife grew greater day by day. The man hated with hot blood, impulsiveness, and violence; but the woman hated icily, and with a slow and deadly smile. For both, hate poisoned life and joy.

Like a deadly vapour from the ground bringing noisome death to all within its vicinity, the poisonous fumes of their hatred enwrapped all these two did, or said, or saw. The thing became a monster, an obsession, a glass through which the world was seen darkly.

It threatened to go to monstrous lengths, to break up lives. It lay seething under their outward conventional demeanour, fighting to burst out. The matter of Silver-sands compelled their constant meeting, constant discussion, and often opposition.

They would sit facing each other across the office-table, a pile of papers concerning plans and estimates scattered about, their eyes meeting unwillingly now and then, the woman smiling her strange deadly smile, and pushing on all the time to victory, and between them, invisible to outward eyes as are the most vital things of life, the sheathed sword that both longed to wield.

Out of little things can love grow; out of smaller still is hate born. Love in its first passion and fervour is with us for a year or a day, but hate is there for all the years. Many can unlove; few can unhate. Love can be measured and killed; who can measure or kill hatred? Love's passion is a thing of youth or maturity, but hate's fierce fire can go hand in hand with old age.

74 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

So it was with these two. By their board and by their bed, Love's dark, terrible twin-sister kept them company.

Lady Daventry would remember the young, pale, handsome face, with its mobile lips and fine arched brows, the dark red hair, the quick, hot flush, and the contempt in the red-brown eyes. She would rage that this man was not to be lightly overthrown, that she could not cast him out, have him flung to the gutter.

In the end it would be he and his who bade her go.

The way of two hungry dogs with one bone was friendly compared with the hearts of these two.

Her cold and perfect face, with perfect lips a-sneer, would come to Bruce a dozen times a day, tormenting, maddening, making him grind his teeth, and long to master and compel this creature to own him neither fool nor raw boy. She was always putting him in the wrong, always getting the better of him, proving infinitely the cleverer, laying traps into which he fell. He was no match for her in any way; but he would not acknowledge it. He had an itch for victory, for mastery, for mad brutality, that should bid him pause. Rock, icicle, he would beat her down at last, sting her into red, resentful life.

Everything in him that was unworthy, everything that was vile and petty and brutal, and hitherto Bruce had been better than his fellows, rushed into being at sight of his enemy. In these hours of black hate a nature built for nobility, for purity and high ideals, fell to the lowest depths. For one with his head among the stars it was a very terrible fall, and plunged in outer darkness it would seem impossible ever to reach out to the stars again. He would wrestle with the thing that sought to overthrow him, but he could not prevail. Hate was stronger than aught else.

Lady Daventry sank no lower; she was of those who have no height to fall from, no lower depth to seek. She did not seek to overthrow hate; she sought to tame it to her indomitable will.

As Silversands grew nearer realisation, the work that fell on Bruce's shoulders was enormous, and more than was reasonable. He was far too proud to obtain assistance and show the enemy that the work was too great, and sat up half the night working feverishly. A clerk would have cost the estate a hundred a year, and Lady Daventry saw

no reason why a hundred pounds should go for the benefit of an agent, already, from her grasping point of view, overpaid. It was not that Lady Daventry ever earned the stigma of "meanness"; she just stopped short of that, but she always managed to obtain the very best possible value for her money.

Lord Daventry had been troubled on and off with gout for some time, and was extremely irritable and unreasonable, and not fit to be bothered. He was told that his young wife and Bruce were managing everything between them, and was quite satisfied. Had he guessed how matters really stood he would have appointed an assistant at once, and forced a holiday on his over-worked nephew.

Lady Daventry nursed the invalid with devoted patience, and her power over the infatuated old man grew ever vaster, became indeed absolute. He had always been very selfish with women, but he was not selfish with her. Her tender care was the only thing that helped him to bear his pain and boredom, but he would not let her remain too long in the sick room, he would not have her there at all when the pain was very bad, and he insisted that she should go about and enjoy herself. He allowed her to be with him during certain hours of the day, but never during the night.

"You are young," he said when she remonstrated with him, and begged to be allowed to take entire charge, "and I am old. I have had my day, it's your turn to have yours. I will take a little of it, my darling, but I will not take the whole. You are not looking well as it is, you are pale, thin, strung-up. This attack will pass as others have passed, then we will go about together again, but till then you must go about alone. You are my wife and my companion; you are not my slave or my nurse. Now tell me who was at the Vagnols' dinner last night, and what they talked about?"

In her acid, sardonic way she told him all she thought would amuse him. She laid bare before him the vapid soul and conversation of a certain local young man, and the covert love-making of two others, one of whom was vicious rather than vapid. Then her bitter wit painted for her delighted listener the defeat of a certain famous lady-killer and his incredulous astonishment.

"He thinks I am playing the old game in a new way,"

76 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

she added, "and that my scalp will yet be added to the rest. He asked most sympathetically after your gout, and said he supposed one 'had to put up with being laid by the heels now and then after one's first youth.' He knew of course that you had just celebrated your seventy-sixth birthday. He imagined the young wife delighted to escape from her trying, jealous old tyrant, and his manner seemed to congratulate me on my successful truancy and imply that if I wanted a knight errant at any time . . ." she paused, laughing, and Lord Daventry laughed too, his grasp tightening on her hand.

"Doubtless he fancies me treasuring his protestations in my heart. He certainly does not suspect I only treasured them up for your edification. It's a very obvious world, I think, for it always jumps to the obvious conclusion." Then her voice grew cold. "Mr. Daventry was there," she added.

"Was he at all attentive to Belle Vagnol? I have sometimes thought . . . and it would please me. None can make such a Lady Daventry as you, but Belle Vagnol would be good and suitable."

Lady Daventry withdrew her hand, and sat back into the shadows. "Need we find a new Lady Daventry yet?" she asked.

"I'd be glad to have it settled," he returned with some irritation. "Every young man has one vast possibility, that of making some preposterous marriage. The Vagnol connection would be excellent."

"Bruce Daventry will not need to make a fool of himself," she returned harshly. "Nature has been beforehand."

"You are too hard on him, dearest. Of course there is something antagonistic in your natures, and perhaps his idealism is rather irritating, but he has his virtues."

"And no vices?" she sneered.

"None," returned the old man steadily, "though Nature has made him hot-blooded and impulsive and no anchorite, and his father died of drink. He is immaculate, and I suppose that is why he bores me. A young saint is no fit companion for an old sinner. Now Adam, you should see Adam Fiffe, my dear!"

"I am quite content with my living Lord Daventry, thank you."

"But he can't go on being the living Lord Daventry, child, that's the mischief! Of course I am getting better, in fact I shall be about next week and as fit as ever, till next time. And so it will go on, gout, or some other evil, for a month or two, or a year or two, and then . . . the greatest evil!" He changed his position with a groan. "Death, my dear, death and the devil!"

"Who knows what may not have happened by then?" She looked past him into the shadows, her face very white and sick, and very resolute.

"My darling, we can only put off the evil day for a little time, we've got to face it in the end, both of us. I shall provide for you to the best of my ability, but it must mean the Dower House and the Dowager."

"And the new Lady Daventry driving past. I shall see those in power passing many times during the day at my four corners!" Her laugh was rather ghastly. "When that day comes I will face it, but till it comes I will put it far from me."

"You will be a very young and lovely Dowager," he sighed.

"Perhaps," she answered tensely, "or perhaps I shall be no longer young and lovely."

"My dear, you will be young and lovely for another twenty years, and I dare not hope for another ten. I dare not count on five."

She kissed him. "Five, fifteen, twenty, you shall count on them all," she cried gaily, "leave that to me, Lionel. I will see to it. Never shall a life be so guarded!"

The tears of old age and weakness and great love rose to his keen grey eyes, which grew suddenly misty as a child's. "God bless you, my love, my darling!" he said huskily.

The clock struck, and Lord Daventry turned, counting its strokes, and looked towards Lady Daventry who stood with the firelight playing odd tricks with her cold face. "Time, my dear," he said.

She stooped and kissed him, and without another word went softly from the room.

She walked swiftly down the long avenue, and taking a short cut through the dense woods, came to the agent's house. She stepped on the verandah where the long French windows of the sitting-rooms revealed them empty, and

78 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

making her way to the back, tapped imperiously on the office door.

Bruce opened it for her. His lips tightened at sight of the enemy who had such a disturbing influence upon his emotions, and the red rushed to his cheeks. He had worked late into the previous night, started very early that morning, and was tired out.

But Lady Daventry stood there ruthless and malicious, a mass of papers in her hands.

"Will you look through these and get them off by this evening's post?" She commanded rather than asked.

He took them, glancing at the clock. "I can do my best, Lady Daventry," he said with a frown.

"There is time," she said rather insolently, and turned to go. She had a way of walking that drew all men's eyes; it was free, graceful, panther-like: it revealed exquisite body, exquisite limbs.

He watched her with bitter rage and burning hate. It was becoming a persecution, she was driving him beyond endurance, and he believed she was doing it purposely. He saw her object: she was trying to drive him from Daventry, from his own beloved heritage, to compel him to resign his position.

He saw red in that moment, for he loved Daventry and all it stood for, as he hated the interloper, and all that was hers, even the maddening beauty which could stir the senses to delirium.

"I won't go!" he said savagely. "Some day she will be the one to go, and in that hour I will mete out the mercy she has meted out to me! She will at last recognise that it is the man, not the woman, who is master!" His face grew primitive with passion; his eyes burned.

This hate was eating into his soul, searing his flesh, ruining his moral nature. It made him restless, reckless, wretched. His books failed of solace, his pen became inanimate, the enemy's mocking face sneered at him from page and paper. He sought to write an article for *The Old Brigade*, but he found himself writing her name.

"It's like an obsession!" he gasped.

She was everywhere, her influence like iron. The tenants realised who stood at the head: they took their wishes and their grievances to Lady Daventry. From her

decision there was no appeal: Bruce Daventry found himself a nonentity on the estate he had managed well enough, if not brilliantly or progressively. The future Lord Daventry no longer counted, even the present Lord Daventry did not count as he had once done; it was Lady Daventry who stood in the foreground.

As an organiser she had no equal, and her wonderful imagination saw far. Her powerful hands held all the reins. Socially it was she who led, others who were content to follow. Nobody was jealous of her abilities: they were too far above their own. She had her own plane. Any appointment from stable-boy to goodly Preferment was decided by her, and to do her justice, decided for the best. She always knew the right man for the right place, the perfect servant, and found them quickly. They were hers body and soul. At the end of six months, there was scarce an old member left of the staff, outside or in, and Daventry had never been better served or at less cost.

Bruce alone remained, an agent with but the mockery of power, an heir who did not count. That she had decided to displace him in favour of a certain would-be malleable agent, he knew, but she could not do that without his co-operation, and that he would never give. Her omnipotent will had met its equal, perhaps its master.

"She is not so clever as she thinks or she would not make an enemy of the future Lord Daventry," he told himself as he looked after her, "and she cannot keep the old man alive, or me out of my inheritance. The time will come when it will be I who rule in her place, and she who is shorn of all power."

He thought of that day with cruel exultation. He was her servant now, he would be her master then, or at least no more her servant.

His pulse beat high as he foresaw a great encounter, the sword unsheathed at last, his own victory; but there was one thing he never foresaw, never dreamed of in his wildest imaginings, and that was the reaction, the swing of the pendulum.

CHAPTER IX

THE SWING OF THE PENDULUM

"The subtlest temper has the smoothest style ;
Sirens sing sweetest when they would betray."

—MICHAEL DRAYTON.

WHEN did the change, slow, subtle, deadly, first set in ? Perhaps only the woman could have told. But it came, engineered by that conscienceless brain, a veritable Car of Juggernaut driving over broken lives.

Afar off lay the consequences, and laughed as they waited. They knew they were to have their hands full, dealing this card to one, that to another, and that among the cards would be death, and sin, and shame. There would be influences reaching out to many lives, changing the fate of another, and unborn, generation. This woman, to suit her fell purpose, was to unleash the hounds of hell. Even she had hesitated, hoped for another way, but when the other way became impossible, then she set her ruthless will to the one way left.

But Bruce pacing up and down in the coppice, looking at the village lying at his feet, dreaming idly, vaguely, had no thought of any of these things. He was drinking in the scene before him, and very thankful to remember that some day all these fair possessions would be his. He wanted them, not for greed, but for love. As a Daventry he belonged as much to Daventry as Daventry would belong to him.

He stood in a soft, deep twilight, and let the beauty and peace of the scene lay its healing hands upon him. Below him there was humanity and there was light ; like a thin wild trail of fire it coiled round the evening village, the little spurts of flame spitting out in the darkness. Afar off

THE SWING OF THE PENDULUM 81

there sounded the North Sea, the soft wind had its taste of the wild salt freedom.

He wondered how men endured life in cities, shut away from these things. "I could not live away from this, only half of me would be alive," he mused, looking to where night's dusky fingers had gathered up the stars in a dense little heap; to where all was very clear, and very still.

"Ave Maria, it is the hour of prayer; Ave Maria, it is the hour of love," he quoted to himself, and unconsciously he sighed. He turned from the stars to look at the valley.

Suddenly there came a soft silken rustle, a long deep sigh, and a figure in white moved close to him.

To his intense surprise and annoyance, he recognised Lady Daventry. To his still greater surprise and annoyance, she laid her hand upon his arm.

"Please take me home," she said almost piteously, and there was some subtle dependence in her tones which stirred him. "I think someone followed me, and I am afraid." Her hand tightened on his sleeve, and she moved a little closer. Her hair almost brushed his lips, and its beauty and its scent assailed him.

Lady Daventry was afraid and had appealed to his protection! He could see no more than that. The strong had become the weak; the conqueror leaned upon his strength, sought it.

"Nobody ever comes here," he managed to say.

"Except you and me." Her voice was very low and sweet. "But there was something, a footstep, I think."

He put his hand over hers, and his face flushed. A terrible blazing world seemed to open up like a pit before him. He had known every phase of hate, but this was something new, stronger, fiercer.

"A keeper, perhaps." His voice startled him, it was so rough, so husky. "You are all right now." His thin, muscular fingers wrung hers.

It must have been torture, but she only smiled and sighed, her face half turned away, her eyes half downcast.

He felt very much lord of himself and of the world, even master of this timid, shrinking creature. And he had held that none was strong enough to master her, none strong enough to bend or break her pride. His blood surged in a chaos of exultation. He had never realised his own vast

82 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

strength before ; and it was because he saw it through Lady Daventry's eyes, that he had to realise it. She almost feared it ; her eyes told him that against her own will, and they were the most wonderful eyes in the world.

" You are very good," she faltered, " too good, I think, but they say the strong are always merciful." The wooing voice was very sad, a little broken. " I don't deserve it," she said, ashamed. " I am a wicked woman, Mr. Daventry." Her head fell forward and the moon beat down upon it, silvering the hair, caressing the long slender throat, making of her great beauty something almost unearthly. This was no woman of the earth, rather was she a young man's mad dream, come to life, that Helen called the World's Desire. A terrible enchantment fell upon Bruce.

" No, oh no ! You shall not say such things ! " he cried.

" But I must say them," her voice held a sob, " for they are true. I am a wicked woman. I am young and I married an old man ; I did not know it was a sin then, but I know it is a sin now. I only seized upon a way of escape from an intolerable home, where all were pitted against me to make life unendurable, or to marry me to a brute. Lord Daventry was kind, I thought I would be happy, and so I was, till you crossed my path."

" I ! " he cried, " I ! "

" Yes, you. You despised me, I had to see myself through your eyes. Your ideals mocked at mine. I had bartered all, all ! There seemed nothing left. What is wealth and power when heart and home are empty ? With all his kindness, what can there be between an old man and a young woman ? What meeting point, what hope of happiness ? " She spoke passionately, as one who had seen a possibility too late. " Your strength taught me my own weakness. Oh, you have taught me much, too much ! Perhaps too late I shall see the one I could, even I, acknowledge as lord and master, and it will be too late, for ever too late ! " She wrung her hands together, and her voice rose in a bitter, haunting cry. " Through my heart, my soul, my very womanhood, I shall be made to pay for this sin ! "

She covered her face with her hands.

The reeling world plunged madly. Bruce caught the hands whose ugliness were hidden from his blinded eyes, and drew them close to his breast. " No, you mustn't

THE SWING OF THE PENDULUM 83

pay, why should you pay?" he cried wildly. He did not know what he was saying.

"One always pays," she returned, "it is justice, but oh, it is hard! How did I know what it was going to mean!"

Her head sank lower. It was almost against his shoulder.

He caught her, held her fiercely, a mad tumult within him. "You are not to blame!" he said thickly.

"I deserve it." Her face was hidden, a wicked, mocking, laughing face for all the tears in her voice. "In my barrenness of soul I sought to grasp the empty bauble of power. It was a poor thing, but all that was left, but you were too strong for me. I could bend the others; you I couldn't bend, so I hated you."

"You don't hate me any longer? Say it! Say it!" he cried.

She did not answer, only shivered a little. If the embrace of the Iron Maiden of mediæval torture would have been the lesser agony, she gave no sign of it. She pressed her cheek into the hollow of his neck, whimpering a little. "I am afraid," she said again. "Life is so terrible, so lonely. I have no one, no one, and I am not strong enough to stand alone. I am only strong enough for pretence, but it's all a hollow sham, and you have found me out. What is the use of pretending any longer? I cannot even hate you any more."

"Never, never hate me again!" he commanded violently.

"Perhaps I could not if I would," she admitted in a low shamed voice. "Oh, why did you come into my life? Why did you make me realise, too late?"

"I'm glad I did," he said recklessly, "I'm glad I did!"

He held her closer and she struggled a little, her endurance at breaking point.

Her resistance roused all the savagery within him. He gripped her ruthlessly, bent back her head, kissed her with brutal violence. "You shall not go!" he stammered.

But Lady Daventry had played her part for the time being, and she could not endure his touch a moment longer. "We must be mad," she exclaimed, in real horror, "I am your uncle's wife!"

Bruce let her go instantly. He had forgotten she was

84 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

his uncle's wife. She had always been Lady Daventry to him : she was Lady Daventry to him still. He faced her uncertainly, his hand to his throbbing head. He had indeed been mad. He dare not think of the abyss upon which he had stood.

"I beg your pardon," he muttered.

She wrung her hands. "You are too much the conqueror," she said, and turned to go.

"I love you!" he burst out. The words were forced from him against his will, and a flush of shame rose to his eyes that he should take such a word upon his lips in such a connection. He desired this woman beyond all reason, to the very verge of crime, but he did not love her. Deep down hate lurked still. Because he was stronger than she, he must save them both, but he turned sick and faint to think of the peril in which they had been.

She read his thoughts, held out her hand, smiled her strange, sweet, subtle smile. "Let us at least part friends," she implored. "We will forget this madness, it is already past, but there shall be no more enmity between us. Promise me that!"

At her smile, the touch of her hand, the wooing of her voice, Bruce went close to losing his self-control again. "Don't!" he cried sharply.

Her lips quivered, she stood as one unjustly reproved. "Then it is still to be war?" she faltered.

"No, never that! But friends? I am not strong enough! I am not strong enough!" It was a cry of sheer self-terror. He was flinging himself on her mercy, praying her aid against himself.

Lady Daventry smiled well pleased. Always the victory, though this time a victory bitter-sweet! "I think you are strong enough for anything," she sighed enviously. "It was that . . . You were so different to all the rest. A giant in a world of pigmies. Oh, Bruce, Mr. Daventry, I deserve it, I know, it is my just punishment, but I am so miserable, so miserable! If you would help me a little!"

He stood back from touch of her. "I cannot help myself!" he cried despairingly. "Shall the blind lead the blind?"

"No, but the strong shall lead the weak. I have your promise?"

THE SWING OF THE PENDULUM 85

"Yes, yes," he muttered in a dazed fashion.

"That is all I want. When I cannot bear it I will come for your help, and you will not fail me. You have such quick sympathies, you understand me, though my husband says I am a riddle no man can read."

A fierce jealousy of this woman's husband gripped him. "What can an old man know of a young girl?" he demanded.

"Of course he only thinks he knows," she answered gently.

"We must go," he returned. He was afraid of the moonlight silence, the brooding solitude of the woods.

They passed slowly through the coppice. Once or twice her dress or her sleeve touched him, and he was horribly conscious of her nearness and their own isolation.

They came out into the long winding avenue, then across a little path and round by his own house which stood in the castle grounds. The lighted windows shone gaily on the verandah.

Just for an instant Lady Daventry paused. "How warm and cosy it looks," she sighed.

Bruce did not answer. He walked on quickly, his throat suddenly dry.

She fell into step with him. "If ever I am in great trouble I may come to you?" Her voice was urgent, and she looked back at his house.

He hesitated. "Only if it is necessary," he said at length. He saw she did not realise the danger.

"Of course." She said no more, and walked on towards the castle.

Bruce sank into his chair. "My God!" he gasped, his forehead damp. "My God!" He covered his hot, shamed face with his hands. What was this thing that had come upon him like a thief in the night? He dare not name it even to himself. He thought of Lady Daventry more than he had ever done, but he thought of her differently. At times he shrank back in horror and loathing from his own heart.

"It was a sudden madness, it will not come again!" he assured himself at times. At others he made a resolution which he always broke. "I dare not stay. I will go. I will go to-morrow."

— But it was always "to-morrow," never "to-day."

CHAPTER X

ADAM

"I felt so young, so strong, so sure of God."—E. E. BROWNING.

ALTHOUGH Lord Daventry was up and about again, and declared himself as well as ever, the keen, anxious eyes of his wife saw a change. Old age had made giant strides during his illness, and his doctor insisted on perfect quiet and freedom from all excitement.

In a short time these regulations had the desired effect, and Lord Daventry went about almost as hale and hearty as ever. He had never gone to bed before one or two in the morning all his life, and even now this habit remained unchanged, but he rose later, and when ten o'clock came and he sat down for a long read in his library, he often fell into a sound sleep instead.

At times, however, he grew a little irritable, and would take fancies into his head that must at once be assented to.

One of these fancies was Adam Coneybeare-Ffiffe. He must have the boy to stay with him, and there was no more to be said. Lady Daventry tried to turn his thoughts into other directions, even gently to oppose the idea, but the old man must have his way.

A few days later the dark, merry face of Adam Ffiffe was to be seen at the castle, and the old man and the young boy were much together. There was a strange sense of companionship and comradeship between them, though one was at the end, the other at the beginning of life.

Adam was scrupulously courteous towards Lady Daventry, but he did not like her, and she very heartily disliked him. Even if Bruce was removed from her path there was still this boy left. And then she was jealous of the affection of the one being she did care about. She could not bear

anything to go from herself. Lord Daventry was as infatuated as ever, but he wanted the boy as well as his young wife with him. The one without the other could not entirely content him. "If he could have been my son," he would lament over and over again, "he would make the ideal heir."

Lady Daventry's lips would tighten, but she would say nothing in reply, only her jealousy and dislike of the boy increased, and she would make covert fun of his enthusiasms, beliefs, ideals, of which her husband was so oddly indulgent. She knew the boy idolised his mother who was infamous, and that, only second to his mother, came Bruce, whom Lady Daventry believed would prove an idol with feet of clay.

She was far too greedy, too haughty, to share, so that often she said she was tired, or had matters concerning Silversands to see to, and let the man and boy go their walk, or ride, or drive, without her.

On one occasion when they were walking homewards, they were run into, literally, by the twins and the orphan.

The orphan was at once set down with a full stop, and Dosé grasped the peer thankfully by the leg. "Lord," she announced, "I've spended my gold farden."

"We buyed lots of things," said Meg sorrowfully, "but the Woman took them away."

"What sort of things?" inquired Lord Daventry, while Meg and the dark-faced school-boy stared curiously at each other.

"Odd little tyke!" muttered Adam, still staring into Meg's dark eyes, "ugly, but——"

Meg turned to the older man, and her face was full of tragedy. "There was a gun, an' a knife, an' a pink wat," she paused choking, "but the Woman gived them to the boys."

Adam's interest in Meg deepened to admiration. "Fancy a kid havin' the sense to buy things like that!" he exclaimed. He had supposed it would be "dolls and that sort of rot." "Whoever the Woman is, she's a jolly rotter!" he said hotly.

"The gun is bwoke, the knife lost, an' the wat ddownded in the water-butt!" wailed Meg.

88 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"Never mind, you kid, you just buck up!" said the boy kindly.

"What did Dorothea buy?" asked Lord Daventry hastily, not because he wanted to know, but because he wanted to change the subject. Meg's eyes held a limpid pool threatening to overflow.

It was not a fortunate question, for Dorothea burst into a fearful howl of despair. "Dolls, growed-up dolls an' baby-dolls, crowds an' crowds of baby-dolls, an' de boys cutted dem all up and dey is all deaded, an' the boys wouldn't let us do any of the fun'ral cos they wanted to do it all!"

"Just you show me those boys!" said Adam grimly. "How big are they? Bigger'n me?"

"What did the orphan buy?" demanded Lord Daventry helplessly.

The orphan himself was the first to answer this. He fell on his face with a piercing scream, and Meg and Dosé, falling on top of him, screamed too.

Lord Daventry put his fingers in his ears, but his eyes twinkled at Adam. "Their last state is always worse than their first," he said.

Adam disentangled the weeping children, comforted them in brusque boyish fashion, even submitting shamefacedly to an ardent kiss from Meg, and tried to discover what the orphan had done with his store of wealth.

"He fought it was a sweet——" began Dosé.

"So he wallered it," concluded Meg in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Oh, what a waste!" exclaimed Adam, "and what a silly kid."

"He was tooked to the doctor and shooked upside down, an' de farden came out, an' the doctor stole it," added Meg sorrowfully, "or if the doctor didn't, father did. I fink it was father," she decided.

Lord Daventry thought so too.

"I say, what a set of rotters your people are!" exclaimed Adam.

Meg nodded in agreement. "Awful," she said.

Lord Daventry laughed and plunged his hand in his pocket. "Suppose you take them off to the village shop, and buy them rational things, and enough sweets to make—

them happy, or ill," and he dropped some money into the boy's palm.

"Right you are, sir! I'm on! Come along, you beggars!"

"The beggars" needed no second invitation: they came with alacrity. Dosé seized one hand, the orphan the other, but Meg pushed away her sister and took possession. "What's your name, boy?" she asked, already, precocious child, madly in love with this young brown-faced knight.

"Ffiffe," he returned. He was not averse from Meg's passion, but he was rather embarrassed by it.

"The lord called you by a bad name," she returned suspiciously. "He said you were a damn. The Woman smacks us when we say the bad word before company."

The boy laughed, he was a lighthearted creature. "You are the rummiest beggars!" he gasped.

"Isn't," said Dosé indignantly, "an' if you call we's names I shall tell Buce."

"Bruce Daventry! Do you know him?" He turned eagerly: "I say, how jolly! Isn't he a ripper?"

That he had seen so little of his idol on this visit was, for the moment, forgotten. He remembered how he had been wont to find him, and a "friendship" that was very precious. It was a real grief to find him changed, absent, irritable, restless, and always pleading "business."

"He's dweadful busy," said Dosé dolorously, her lip going down.

"He's cwoss," said Meg curtly.

Dosé was up in arms in an instant. "No, he isn't; Buce isn't ever cwoss. He's tired and just worried-like, as Susan says. He likes us just the same, he said so." Unshaken, unshakable faith shone steadfast in her lovely blue eyes.

Adam's face beamed. "That's it, kid!" he agreed heartily. "Of course he's just the same, and I should like to see someone dare to say he isn't. He's a champion, straight as they make 'em, is Bruce Daventry!"

"Tocolates!" said the orphan decidedly, breaking in upon a conversation that did not interest him.

Adam realised he was facing the village shop, and took his small charges inside. Here he bought them "sensible" things. Adam Ffiffe was just fifteen years of age.

90 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

There was a pistol that shot peas with great, and rather dangerous, velocity. They annoyed one dog and two hens going home. Fortunately they missed the vicar of the next parish, a long gentleman with a short temper whose distant back-view, essaying a steep stile, had proved an irresistible temptation.

There was a huge tin trumpet which could be heard a mile off. The orphan tore along the road emitting fearful blasts, until, falling with it and cutting his gums, he emitted sounds quite as piercing and scarcely less musical.

There was a doll that waggled its head. Dosé had chosen that. It waggled it so hard in her energetic hands that it waggled off, never to waggle again, and Dosé wailed in the road over "anuder deaded baby."

There were the tin soldiers the orphan tried to swallow, the tea-service Meg would carry herself with one hand, the other claiming to be held by Adam, and which she fell over and broke, cutting her knees rather painfully.

There was also the skipping-rope, which, for no earthly reason whatever, they tied across the stairs and forgot all about, and which was discovered too late by Susan and the tea-tray, but just in time by Mr. Lister, who thrashed them with it.

And finally there were huge bags of sweets.

Adam was hot and tired when he left them at the vicarage gate, first submitting to Meg's amorous farewell to save further tears. As he strode on homewards he carried away the heart of the "ugly 'un," and was no longer just a British school-boy, but a wonderful fairy prince, who would have to marry his lady, whether he liked it or not, as soon as she was old enough for him. But the ungallant youth was thinking of his luncheon rather than of the lady-love he had neither sought nor desired.

Going up the avenue his face lighted up suddenly, and he forgot his meal-time, for Bruce was advancing towards him.

The young man stopped with his winning smile. "Hullo, Adam! It's not much I see of you these days."

The hero-worshipper had shy, adoring eyes for his hero. "You are always so busy," he said wistfully.

Bruce laid his hand on the youngster's shoulder. "I'm rushed to death, old chap, and worried too."

"If I could help you!"

A hard note came into the other's voice as he answered: "No one can help me. I've got to help myself, Adam, and I only wish I could be more sure of myself!"

"I should always be sure of you," muttered the boy fervently, red and embarrassed, but very much in earnest. He liked Lord Daventry but he could not always respect him. He loved Bruce with a passionate boy-worship second only to the idolatry he gave his mother, and he placed him on a pedestal so high and magnificent, that no one would have been more startled than Bruce had he guessed it. But he never guessed it. He thought the boy was fond of him as he was fond of the boy. They had many tastes in common. It had been pleasant to open the world of books to this eager seeker after life and knowledge. Adam was keen on his games, disliked the things he had to "learn" as school-lessons, but learned with interest and avidity all that Bruce would teach him.

Between him and his father was a great gulf set. Coney-beare-Fiffe was a strange, gloomy, irritable creature who seemed almost afraid of his own son.

Bruce looked down at the fine dark face, the strong tender mouth, the idealistic—passionately idealistic—grey eyes.

"Thank you," he said, "that has helped me. I wish..." Then he paused abruptly, and sighed. "But, look here, we've scarcely had a word this time, and I've some new books I should like to show you. Come in some evening after dinner, as often as you can. I'm usually in then, and should be glad of company." He spoke almost feverishly, clutching at Adam's companionship as a drowning man clutches at a straw. Perhaps this strong, clever boy with the earnest eyes would be the means of exorcising that image he strove to drive away.

"It's got to be done, somehow!" he muttered to himself, for the thing was not getting weaker; it was getting stronger.

"You bet I'll come!" cried the boy joyfully.

He was as good as his word, and that evening Bruce forgot for a little time a terrible obsession, a haunting dread, a burning, sickening jealousy. The red head bent closely over the dark head of his boyish chum as he showed him new treasures, and some of his own printed articles in

92 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

The Old Brigade. Adam was boyishly enthusiastic, and very proud of such a distinguished friend, who was in his eyes not only morally, but intellectually, a giant.

He looked at him with grey eyes of awe. "It's wonderful," he said, adding slowly, "you are so different. I expect you will be great soon."

Bruce shook his head and sighed a little. "Sometimes I hope so too, and then, and then . . . It's so difficult to explain. You see, I have the ideas, the thoughts, and they seem so big, so splendid and new; and then when I write them down, well, they are not great or new or splendid at all." The face that had grown so thin and haggard and old since Adam's last visit grew more haggard, more tormented, more hopeless. "Oh, everything is a fight!" he burst out, and began restlessly to pace the room, "and sometimes it isn't worth it, and other times it's useless!" They would be sitting in the library together, he supposed, the old man and the young lovely girl . . . "Useless," he cried almost frantically, "useless!"

His face was twitching, and Adam looked at him aghast.

"I say, you look bad," he said, "off colour, you know. You've been working too hard. Why don't you go away?"

Bruce sank into a chair. "I can't go away," he said; "I have tried, but I can't. Besides, only a coward runs away."

"It's rotten, shoving all that extra work on you. Cut it and clear out. Bosh about it being cowardly. You could never be that."

"No," said Bruce, "I won't. I'll stay and fight to the bitter end."

He went to the sideboard as he spoke, and it seemed to Adam, who watched him uneasily, conscious of high tension in the air, that Bruce was not only ill but miserable, and also that he was drinking a very great deal of whisky and water, and that the whisky was rather out of proportion to the water.

He was really rather uneasy about his friend, "one of the best," as he returned to the castle and found Lord Daventry half asleep in the library and Lady Daventry retired for the night.

CHAPTER XI

SIN

"All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman."—*Eccles. xxv. 19.*

BRUCE stood by his open French window. A pale moon eyed him wanly, but he did not notice the moon : he could see nothing but the dim, distant lights of the castle. Up there was the old man, his uncle, and the woman he madly desired. Love he did not name, even to himself, the thing that held him in thrall.

At times he was sorry, at others he was fiercely glad, to know the woman gave him gold for dross, all her passionate love, all her trust. It made the temptation more terrible, more subtle ; he must be strong for both, for all depended upon his strength.

He was being driven beyond endurance, and in that moment he realised that their only salvation lay in flight. "I will go to-morrow !" he decreed.

But Fate—and the woman—decreed otherwise. A faint perfume stole to him from the verandah, a rustle, a low sigh, and he did not go away that morrow, or for many morrows.

The lithe figure stole nearer, and he knew Lady Daventry had come to him out of the night and out of the shadows. He turned to flee, but turned too late, for with a quick passionate movement, a low cry, she had flung herself into his arms, and was clinging to him.

He drew her through the window, pushed to the shutters and then looked down upon the thing he held. She clung a little closer, hiding her face upon his breast.

So she hid it ; not in shame, or love, or wantonness, but that he might not see the sick loathing of her eyes, the cold horror of her mouth.

94 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"I—I must take you home!" stammered the young man huskily.

"Home . . . I have no home but here!" She clung to him in passionate surrender. "Oh, Bruce, it is horrible up there. I am so young and he is old, old, old."

Adam Ffiffe was returning home after a late fishing expedition, and as he reached the lodge gates he struck a match and studied his watch. It was close on two o'clock, and the moon had died away, leaving an inky sky.

The boy groped his way down the avenue as best he could; he had not expected the boats to have remained out so long, or he would have taken a lantern. He went round by the agent's house, the road was no more difficult to find, and shorter, and he might catch a sight of Bruce reading late in his window, and exchange a few words.

But the window stood shuttered and dark, and he was passing on with a feeling of disappointment when he heard a soft creak. The shutters were being pushed back, and out of a cavern of darkness Adam fancied he saw step a woman's figure. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, remaining motionless in the thick black shadows.

Undoubtedly there was someone, more than one, for another figure was dimly outlined holding a lantern.

Then Adam saw the woman snatch the lantern from the other, thrust him back with an imperious gesture, and come swiftly towards him.

He remained staring.

The tall slight figure passed, unconscious of his nearness, and by the light of the lantern he saw the white set face of Lady Daventry.

In all innocence, in all unconsciousness, he was starting forward to make his presence known, when something he did not understand bid him pause.

He let her pass without a word, and followed softly at a distance, trying to puzzle out the mystery. Why should there be this air of secrecy about her visit to the agent's house, and why should she seek Bruce Daventry so late? They met no more than they could possibly help, they hated each other too much; Lord Daventry had told him all about that bitter antagonism. Then what had happened?

Was something wrong? Had Lord Daventry been taken ill? He hurried after the tall figure now so far ahead.

Close to the castle Lady Daventry blew out the lantern, but she did not enter by the front door. She went round to the side, and the boy heard the turn of a key in the lock. It was very mysterious.

He went to the front door, which had been left unlocked for him, and going inside locked it and put the chain on. Then he went to see if Lord Daventry was still in the library.

The old peer lay sleeping, his book disregarded on the floor, but he woke at once at sound of the boy's footfall.

"So you're back," he said, sitting up with a yawn, "and I must have dropped off to sleep. It's a shocking habit! I came in to read as usual after Lady Daventry had gone up to her room."

"Up to her room?" echoed the boy quickly.

"Yes, she goes at ten, you know. Beauty sleep, my boy, beauty sleep! I am too old for it to help me, and you too young to need it, but Lady Daventry is a miser!" He laughed. "And she has beauty worth hoarding, eh?"

"Yes," agreed the boy slowly, and went thoughtfully to his own room.

"So it's a secret," he thought, sitting on the edge of his bed and making no attempt at undressing. "She says she is going to bed at ten, but instead goes out of the house, and doesn't get back till two. It's very odd."

Next day it seemed to Lady Daventry that the strange dark boy she disliked looked at her very critically. He seemed puzzled about something. She wondered what it was.

She did not like his scrutiny, it was too searching, and not for the first time she wished her husband had never asked him, but when she hinted her objections to Lord Daventry he only laughed.

"The boy interests me," he said, "always has, always will. He's a remarkable study, a remarkable boy, so young for fifteen and so old! So clever, and yet so innocent and idealistic. It is not that he does not know of evil, but that he must believe in the good. And he has two such odd idols! Your enemy Bruce for one, a good enough young

man, and his green-eyed French mother for another. Sawdust, my dear, like many gods, sawdust! Worse in his mother's case. She is supposed to have come out of a convent. An odd convent mothered that lady, unless I am much mistaken. I wonder how much longer Ffiffe is going to be blind, if he is blind!" He laughed, though rather wryly. The woman was a member of his own family, and he would have had his own women immaculate. "There'll be a pretty hideous scandal one of these days, and I wonder how Adam will take it."

"Do you mean his mother's numerous male friendships are—are . . . ?" Lady Daventry curled a disgusted and fastidious lip, quite genuinely nauseated. "How can there be women like that! It's horrible! Yet her husband is friendly with them, seems to like having them there . . ."

Lord Daventry frowned. "Coneybeare-Ffiffe is a fool, but he isn't that sort of a hound!" he said rather shortly. "What he sees or doesn't see I can't say, but he loves the woman. He can't know the truth, or he wouldn't back her up even to save a scandal. There are limits."

"Adam seems so unlike them both," said Lady Daventry.

"There I beg to differ from you, my dear. He's got some of both of them: there is his mother; there's his father's gloomy bitterness, his cynicism latent, but there. I tell you Adam may go either way. That is what makes him so interesting."

"He's just a bright, merry boy."

"Because he is fifteen and healthy, and the world has gone well with him. But will he make a bright, merry man? Adam could drown in deep waters easier than many. He could go rather horribly wrong, but we shall see. At least you will, darling. There are so many futures that the family vault will shut out from my view!"

"I will not let you talk like that! It's too bad now you are quite well and strong again!" She seated herself on the edge of his chair, her hand on his shoulder.

He leaned against her happily and closed his eyes. "I'm only an old man, my dearest," he said rather piteously. "I try to cheat Truth now and then, but he won't be cheated long. And I'm rather a tired old man."

"If you leave me I shall be alone!" She caught desperately at his hand, panic in her voice. When this

man passed, the only affection, only friendship and companionship of her life would have passed too.

"It won't be willingly, you can make sure of that, but somewhere there's a Will stronger than mine."

"The law of nature," interposed his wife, her voice hard.

"Perhaps only that, but at least a Something that will say, 'Go, and he goeth.' There's no reprieve, no mitigation of that sentence, child. If only Adam was my heir instead of Bruce!"

Lady Daventry sat back where he could not see her face, and clenched her hands. "You may have an heir of your own, yet," she said.

Lord Daventry laughed rather drearily. "The age of miracles is past, my dear, and some things will always be too good ever to come true. That is one of them. I wish you would make friends with Bruce." He turned quickly, saw her face. "You hate him as much as that!" he exclaimed, for her eyes had been terrible in their hatred.

"More, more, a thousand times more! Hell itself could hold no more of hatred!"

"He will have so much in his power when I am gone. It is not well to pit yourself against the powers that be."

"You are not gone yet. When Bruce Daventry has more power than I, it will be time enough to withdraw the gage." Her voice startled him with its fierceness.

The old man was silent. When he was dead this proud, fierce woman would have to bow her head to the yoke of the man she hated. She would be but as the beggar without the gates, for the estates were all strictly entailed, everything went to the heir. Lord Daventry had no private fortune to leave and had always been a spender. His widow's portion would consist of a charge upon the estate, which Bruce would pay her. It would gall her beyond endurance, be one of those unbearable things which have to be borne.

He saw it unbearable, but he did not see it impossible. Certainly she was greedy, he acknowledged this flaw in his idol, and he would have filled those grasping hands if he could.

All the power she loved would be wrested from her! Even Silversands would be developed, or not developed,

98 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

exactly as it should seem good to the man who had never cared about the scheme.

"The gods give me length of years!" he burst out almost wildly, and it was for the sake of another he voiced this prayer.

"They shall, they shall!" cried Lady Daventry, setting her mouth like a vice.

Adam continued to puzzle over a mystery he could not solve. He believed Lady Daventry and Bruce to dislike each other, to try to avoid each other, and yet— She was such a strange woman too, so cold, so hard, so unlike his own vivid, green-eyed mother. He tried to see Bruce, but Bruce was not to be found, and once when he caught sight of him in the distance, he thought him looking ill and changed.

He was troubled as well as puzzled. Jealousy was not wanting. He had believed Bruce his friend, had even flattered himself that to a certain extent the young man had need of him, and he was not wanted after all.

It was lonely in the evenings, for Lady Daventry went early to her room, and the old peer slept in the library, and there was nothing left for the boy to do but to wander aimlessly round the grounds till he felt inclined for bed.

Then there came that night when things were no longer a puzzle, but a very shameful illumination, and the idol fell and was shattered beyond repair. Adam was walking listlessly in the shadowy dusky woods when he came full upon Bruce with Lady Daventry in his arms.

He stood petrified with horror and astonishment.

"Mine, mine, not his!" he heard Bruce say exultantly, saw him kiss the woman with mad passion. "I wait for you night after night, and when you do not come I feel I shall go mad!" His voice was rough and broken, almost distraught. "I have not seen you for three days. You shall not keep away any longer, do you hear?"

"I was afraid he might suspect," sighed Lady Daventry. "Perhaps to-night——"

"You promise! You do not know what I endure. I ask myself questions, terrible questions. I wonder if I have lost your love."

Lady Daventry laughed, not a pleasant laugh.

"Why do you laugh like that?" asked Bruce almost angrily.

"Because you asked such an impossible question. Rest assured of this, whatever comes or goes, you can never lose my love."

"And you do not regret? At least tell me that!"

"No," she returned clearly, "I do not regret."

Then Adam tore his leaden feet from their hold and turned to go, sick with disgust and despair.

A twig snapped sharply. Bruce noticed nothing. The terrible madness that possessed him made him deaf and blind to all save his own ruinous passion, but the woman saw, and her lips grew white.

How long had the boy been there? How much had he heard? How much had he understood? Many would have lost their nerve; hers rose to the emergency. She must forestall Adam with Lord Daventry. That night Bruce must wait for her in vain. The boy had gone by one path. Without a word of explanation to Bruce she fled by another.

She reached the castle first and went swiftly into the library, and Lord Daventry looked up with a smile. "I'll forgive you for disturbing me, darling," he said fondly, holding out his hand. "Now tell me where you have been, what you have been doing, whom you have been flirting with, deceiving the neglected, blinded old husband!"

He laughed, and Lady Daventry echoed his laughter. "If you hadn't been such a reprobate in your youth, I should not have to give such a minute account of my doings!" she cried gaily and stroked his hand. "You bad old man! Suppose I decline to tell you the name of your latest would-be rival? Suppose I decline to tell you anything?" She was leaning forward and listening intently. The front door slammed. "As a matter of fact," she went on, speaking more quickly and exhibiting a sodden shoe, "I went for a stroll in the woods as I often do—I sleep so much better afterwards—but Bruce was there, and so——" she ended with a laugh and a shrug.

He looked up at her worshipping. "I can guess the rest," he chuckled; "you fled as if from the devil himself."

"I doubt flying from the devil I merely fled from the

100 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

saint. I thought I saw Adam, but I could not be sure. He passed so quickly."

As she spoke the door opened and Adam appeared. He looked white and strange, but as he glanced from one to the other his face flamed suddenly. He was young, clean, innocent; but he was not a fool. He had seen enough, heard enough, to point to but one conclusion, and one so horrible that he had to lower his eyes for very shame before this woman. For a bitter moment he wondered if the world was such a fair place after all, and its men and women all that he had supposed.

Lady Daventry turned, yawning slightly. "Why didn't you wait for me?" she asked softly. "Didn't you hear me call?—I was talking to Bruce Daventry. I was hoping we might come back together; as it was, I had to come alone."

Lord Daventry looked at the boy with a frown. "Why did you not wait for Lady Daventry?" he demanded sharply.

Adam stared at his feet. "I did not hear her call," he returned, "and I have come to say that I must go home to-morrow."

"He suspects something," thought the woman, as she sat smiling on the arm of her husband's chair, lightly swinging her arched foot to and fro, "something, but how much?" He could not, of course, suspect the truth. At the worst he would believe she was indulging in a foolish flirtation and be sufficiently shocked, and sufficiently silent. He would quickly forget the incident because he would consider it "unpleasant." She was safe; and she was getting rid of an unwelcome guest.

"If he had been older!" she thought. "He will at least be a man, not a weakling."

"You find it dull, Adam?" said Lord Daventry, and sighed.

Adam said nothing.

"Well, well, I must not keep you against your will, but you do not mean to-morrow, surely?"

"My—my people will be wanting me," returned the boy, not raising his eyes. "I shall telegraph first thing. I've had a rippin' time, thanks for havin' me."

He appeared not to see his hostess.

"Nay, boy, no thanks are needed. Youth favours age, not age youth."

The next day he took his young guest to the station, and bestowed a very handsome tip upon him. Adam was glad enough of it. His father never gave him money; but for his mother he would have fared badly.

"I hope you'll come for a part of next holiday," said Lord Daventry almost imploringly; "there are not many of us left: we should hang together. Bruce is not quite my style. Lately he's been unbearable, and I've been afraid lest he's taken to his father's curse. He doesn't always seem to be knowing what he is saying or doing. But I forgot, he's your friend."

"No!" said the lad sharply, his face crimson, "no!"

"Ah, so he's found his books better company, and you are out of it! Well, don't trouble, boy," for the young face was troubled, "it isn't worth it, and it's the way of the world. You can divide it into the takers and givers, and the givers go to the wall. Be the taker next time."

"There won't be a next time," said Adam, staring sullenly ahead. The blow had dulled him at first; it was a sharper agony now. All that he had raised up, down in the dust! All that he had idealised and loved, a chimera, a thing that had never been!

"There are those kids," he said, pointing to the vicarage gate. There was no interest in his tones. "Rather jolly beggars; I suppose I shan't see them again!" He climbed down for an instant, made his farewells.

"When I am grown up I shall marry you," announced Meg positively.

Adam's smile was slightly superior. "I shan't marry," he said, "girls are silly, and they take all a fellow's cash. Not good enough! Besides," he added in lordly fashion, "a fellow likes a pretty wife, to do him credit."

"I'll be pretty," swore Meg with determination, "an' I'll do cweddit, an' I'll marry you, Adam."

"All right, kid!" he returned, and climbed back into the dogcart.

Lord Daventry was laughing. "Whoever marries that girl will have his hands full," he said, "and get a good run for his money."

"Well, it won't be me," said Adam indifferently. "My hat! but she's ugly!"

When they got to the station the train was on the point of departure, and Lord Daventry concerned himself with getting his young relative and the luggage off in time.

"Just done it!" he exclaimed. "Well, good-bye, old man! Don't let it be too long before you come again!" His eyes were suddenly far from gay. Next time! Next time! Would there be any next time? There rushed over him a sense of certainty that he was looking on Adam for the last time.

Adam said nothing. Had he guessed they were never to meet again, he might have given the promise that would have cost him nothing, and which would have meant so much to the old man who loved him. But he left Lord Daventry without this comfort.

"Ah well, life is for the young," sighed the old man, "and it must have been rather boring for him at times." He drove quickly home, where youth and love and beauty still awaited him.

"I am very lucky," he thought, as Lady Daventry insisted on helping him off with his coat herself; "I've done some pretty ugly sowing in my time, but I have escaped the reaping."

And he smiled very tenderly, very happily, down upon his beautiful idol. "I bored that boy," he confessed ruefully. "Jane, are you sure that I never bore you?" He waited breathlessly for her answer.

"Never when you are with me, but always when you leave me," she returned, speaking no more than the truth.

CHAPTER XII

LULU CONEYBEARE-FFIFFE

"But he knoweth not that the dead are there, and that her guests are in the depths of hell."—*Proverbs*.

ADAM came and went much as he pleased, and his telegram roused no comment. His holidays were his own to do what he chose with, and his parents were always glad for him to go to Daventry. After all, he might be Lord Daventry himself one day. More unlikely things had happened. It was a long time since the place had gone from father to son, and if Bruce left no heir, then Adam must step into his shoes.

He ran straight up to his mother's boudoir, where she sat writing a long letter. She put her pretty hands carelessly over it as her son entered, and looked up with a radiant smile. She was a very lovely woman, with the eyes of one who in all matters spent recklessly.

"Back already!" she said, and yet with glad welcome. She leaned her lovely auburn head caressingly against his shoulder, and he gazed down at his beautiful, wonderful mother with whole-souled admiration. Bruce had fallen, she remained the sole idol. Even with her son, her ways were the ways of a coquette, and she could no more help it than she could help coming of the stock she did. She knew he worshipped her, thought her the best, as well as the fairest, of women, and though she laughed, yet it was a laugh of discomfort. She trusted to keep his love and faith for many a long day to come. But beyond that day even she dare not look. He might never guess: nay, he should never guess.

"Yes," he said awkwardly, "she—I thought she was—was not nice, not—good. So I came back to you, materkin."

104 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"So you came back to me!" she echoed, and voice and green eyes were alike strange. "Oh, Adam, Adam!" Her face shadowed for an instant. "You expect too much, idealise too much." She traced some patterns idly with her pen. "You will not find encouragement with Lord Daventry."

"Oh, he—he's an awfully decent old sort, if he does say rather awful things. His deeds always seem better than his words."

"And the new Lady Daventry? You do not like her? That is a pity. It is always a pity to dislike the powers that be, and Lady Daventry is a power."

The blood rushed to his face. "She's . . . hateful," he said, looking away.

His mother's eyes searched his face. "She's an icicle," she returned. "The old man knew what he was about. You expect more than is reasonable of people, my son!"

She pushed the letter she had been writing well under the blotter as she spoke.

"I only expect them to be decent."

"People use that word so differently. We all have our notions of decency, I suppose, though I——" She broke off with a frown. "Oh, well, it can't be helped. I was born so."

"You were born the loveliest and the best," he whispered ardently, his head pressed against hers.

"What a lover you will make some day!" she exclaimed; and the boy drew back, jarred by something in her tones he could not understand, but disliked with all his being.

Her eyes grew cynical. "But you will spoil all by expecting too much. You will seek the angel and be upset at finding the woman."

"Do you mean marryin' an' that sort of stuff?" he asked bluntly. "Why do men marry when they are young and jolly? It seems such rot, and girls are so silly."

"If she's no worse than silly! Oh, Adam, may you have better luck than your father has had!" For a moment she faced remorse, but only for a moment. Life was too radiant, too full, for regrets. And she was still young enough to enjoy.

"Materkin! When he has you!"

She laughed, not quite pleasantly. "Yes, he has me! Well, Adam, try and idealise less if you want to get through life happily. Suppose, just for an instant, I was not at all the person you think, but someone not nice, or good, or—or—decent?"

"That's just rot," said the boy sturdily. "You are you, and always will be!" He took a pretty hand caressingly in his large brown paw. "You're rippin', mater, and all the fellows envy me; and the other fellows envy the pater!"

"I'm not so sure!" she returned.

"Well, I am! Look how they buzz about you!" Then his quick grey eyes caught the gleam of jewels, and he pushed up her lace sleeve. "Another bracelet, materkin! What a lot of jewellery you have, and what a fraud the pater is, always pretending to be so poor! It must have cost a fortune! No wonder he's knocked off my hunter! Still, I don't mind—very much!" He squeezed her hand.

"You shall have your hunter!" she said hastily. "This is quite a cheap thing, you absurd boy!" She withdrew her hand quickly and pushed the bracelet back under her sleeve, her voice a little sharp: "Don't get fanciful, Adam! And you are not to mention it to your father; he doesn't like it!"

"You know I never mention anything to father. He—he keeps me at too great a distance. He—sometimes I think he doesn't like me." His face was troubled.

"What a foolish fanciful boy you are to-day!"

"He will not let me join him in anything, go with him anywhere." There was resentment in the tones.

"You are too young to be a companion just yet; in a year or two——"

Adam made no reply. He only felt that every day his father and he grew further and further apart. Mr. Ffiffe was a strange, moody, uncompanionable man.

"Are you alone, or are any of father's friends staying here now?" he asked at length.

"Oh, we have a small house-party coming to-day."

"I never see anything of you, materkin!" he grumbled jealously. "These fellows that come down from London monopolise you so!"

"And who deserted? You or I? Haven't you been

with Lord Daventry, you ridiculous boy? How is your chum, Bruce, the heir?"

Adam turned sharply. When he spoke his voice was hard and bitter. "He is not my chum," he said.

"But I thought——"

"He is not my friend."

"Well, perhaps he is no loss. He is rather a prig, Bruce Daventry."

Adam said nothing.

"The saint soon palls, Adam. Is he going to marry that Vagnol girl?"

"I do not know what he is going to do, nor care," the boy replied savagely, "but I shouldn't think so." His lip curled.

"My dear, won't you tell me? There is something?"

"There is nothing," he insisted. How could he breathe such things to this dearest and purest of women?

"But——"

"Perhaps I found I had thought a little too much of him, that he was not worth bothering about. He doesn't want me now," jealousy showed raw for a moment, "or I him."

"Adam will never share," thought his mother. "I suppose Bruce Daventry has another friend, or perhaps it's some woman." Then she smiled at her son. "Have you ever thought that some day you might be Lord Daventry?" she asked.

"What, me, mater! Have that rippin' old place and the money! An' the fishin', an' shootin', an' huntin'!" His eyes gleamed, then the light died out of them. "But how could I? There's Bruce next, and then father."

"I meant after your father, of course, you're a younger generation. But suppose anything happened to Bruce Daventry, or that he didn't marry, or that he did, but had no son."

The subject seemed to repel Adam; he turned away. "I am quite out of it," he said.

"At present, yes, but not necessarily for always. Of course," she added thoughtfully, "Lady Daventry might have a son."

"Might she, mater?" The boy looked white and startled, and rather bewildered. Then his face crimsoned

painfully, and his eyes fell. "I—I suppose she might," he said jerkily.

"More unlikely things have happened!" Mrs. Ffiffe was laughing to herself. Adam's modesty was shocked at such a suggestion. How embarrassed he looked! Yet he was fifteen years of age, at Eton, and familiar with facts of stable and kennel! How odd the boy was!

He left her, going thoughtfully downstairs, still flushed and startled. As he went he tried to wrest his thought from a hateful subject and a startling possibility.

His mother returned to her letter, and forgot all about Adam. She was fond of her son, but she was fonder still of that thing she dared to name love, and of the besotted admiration of men: of jewels, and luxury, and pleasure. She carried the awful curse of wantonness in her blood, inherited from a long line of courtesans, and that was strongest of all.

Adam met his father crossing the stable-yard, and paused rather awkwardly. Mr. Ffiffe did not stop.

"So you're back," was all he said, and passed on quickly, his eyes falling as if in guilt before the keen clear gaze of the other.

That he and lovely, shameless Lulu should have such a son!

He sat alone in his study. The woman to whom he had given an honourable name to trample in the dust did not want him, had long ceased to want him, though once she had loved him madly: but then she had loved many another madly since, and none had ever lasted with her. With him, unhappily, the wild insensate thing had lasted, and he loved her yet. It was his tragedy.

He had done the thing deliberately, and he was paying deliberately. He had known what she was, what her people had been, but she was so young, and they loved each other. No man had offered her honourable love. He was the first to do that. He believed such love, his and hers, would sanctify the past, make sure the future. He did not realise that Lulu belonged to those who have no vocation for marriage, members of the oldest profession in the world. There was one wildly happy year, and then, when Adam was a few months old, the woman returned in secret, under the shelter of her husband's name, to the

vocation she had once practised openly. She took lover after lover, lightly, easily, naturally; she changed them almost as often as she changed her dressmaker, and she was the more particular about her dressmaker.

And so it had been going on all these bitter years, the man hoping against hope that the madness would pass, or that his own love would die. But the woman grew worse, his terrible love stronger. He could not put her from him, face the exposure; he could only help her to deceive the world, but years had not served to blunt his own shame. He would glance at his son's brown face, deadly ashamed before him, fearful what he might have to read upon that face. Would the boy escape the curse; could he escape the knowledge? The wrung heart of a most unhappy man yearned over his son, but the conscience of a criminal trembled guiltily before him. When he thought what he might have to stand by and witness, his very soul failed him. People were beginning to suspect: men were beginning to know. It was extraordinary they had escaped so long, but they could not hope to escape for ever. He knew the thing was coming near.

That morning as he entered the County club smoking-room all the men present had risen and silently left it. The first to go had been a discarded admirer of Lulu's, a married man who had spent a small fortune upon her caprices, and then been lightly tossed aside for a newer fancy. He seemed to be thanking God that he was not at least as this other man.

The wretched man's endurance was coming to an end. His life seemed to have been spent on the edge of a crater, waiting daily, hourly, for the hot ashes of shame to cover and annihilate him and his.

In that day would there be any place deep enough, any sea vast enough, to hide the shame of the Coneybeare-Fiffes?

In the annals of their country no name stood higher, prouder, for services given, for justly-deserved honours received: but when the crash came, and it was coming, what name in all the annals of degradation would stand lower than theirs?

CHAPTER XIII

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT

THE orphan was early roused from his slumbers. "Wake up!" said Meg rather drastically, "it's come! Our bwrthday. We is six!"

As soon as their scanty mid-day meal was over they hastened to Bruce, expectant of the great feast spread, a large array of presents. There would also be something for the orphan. Changed and distraught as they had found their friend lately, and usually "too busy" to give them the attention they expected, they never doubted that he would come up to their expectations on this day of all days.

But alas! They could only eye each other and the confused guilty-looking young man in wild dismay. The impossible really had come to pass. Bruce had forgotten all about that historic event, their birthday. His stammered excuses, his promise to make up for it at once, his feverish orders to his man to go seek provisions and presents, could not heal their incredulous grief. He had failed them.

In the midst of plenty, Dosé suddenly burst into tears and pushed away her plate. "I don't want fings to eat an' pwesents," she said piteously. "I want you to love me same as ever."

"I do, Dosé, I do!" he declared, taking her on his knee and kissing the tears away.

Meg and the orphan ate till they could eat no more; they waited to reproach Bruce till their appetites were satisfied. Nothing would make Dosé do herself justice. All the time she was conscious of her spoiled birthday and her changed friend.

She cried herself to sleep that night.

Bruce had been ashamed before her pleading, innocent

110 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

eyes. It was easier to sit alone and drown conscience and remorse and unavailing regret by means of a handy glass. How he hated himself, how, at times, he hated Lady Daventry, and yet he was absolutely in her toils. She loved him; he must at least keep up the pretence of love. He would have been glad to go, thankful never to have to look again upon the beauty that had wrecked them both.

How he hated the sin, how difficult not to hate his fellow-sinner. His, not hers, the blame, and yet, and yet——

"If I had guessed in time! If it could all come over again!"

Even the radiance of her beauty seemed dimmed. Once or twice he had caught sight of her and thought she looked paler, thinner, almost haggard. She too was feeling the strain of their mutual deceit, it seemed. Yet it was only her beauty that he cared about; the rest he hated. And most terrible of all, his brief devastating desire was dead.

Why was she no longer so madly beautiful?

Lord Daventry had noticed his wife's changed looks, but he did not resent them; more beautiful, less beautiful, even not beautiful at all, she would always be the one woman to him. He was only very anxious about her.

"Darling, you are looking so ill!" he exclaimed anxiously one day. "You must see the doctor. That faint attack——"

"I will not see the doctor," she returned, going to the window. "I think I should like to go to your place in Scotland for a little time."

"Seeking fresh worlds to conquer, eh?" He placed an arm round her shoulders. "You have got everything shipshape here, and Bruce can go on with it, if he isn't taking to his father's courses."

"What do you mean?"

"Drink." Lord Daventry's laugh held no mirth. "My brother died in an inebriates' home. Bruce used to dislike drink, but though I have seen very little of him for some time, he appears to avoid me, in fact, I have wondered if he was really sober. The boy treated me decently and respectfully enough, but lately he's a mixture of cringing

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT III

servility and blatant insolence! Really at times . . . My God, to think all this must pass to a possible drunkard!"

Lady Daventry turned quickly, and hid her face against his shoulder. "It will not, necessarily, pass to Bruce at all!" she got out, with a little gasp.

Lord Daventry trembled all over. "You cannot mean . . . ?"

She bowed her head. "That is what I mean."

He put his arms round her, put quivering lips against her hair. "It is too much," he said brokenly. "I cannot bear it. It will kill me!" The colour ebbed from his face.

"I did not think I could bear it either," she answered very low, her own face ghastly, "but it is not too much now."

"That I should have said the age of miracles was past! Oh, Jane! Oh, Jane! You are sure?"

"Yes, I am sure. I should like to go away at once before anyone realises, and keep the secret as long as possible. I do not want to come back without my heir. I do not want Bruce to know."

Lord Daventry's face grew sober. "It will be a bad shock to the lad," he said, "he loves Daventry."

Lady Daventry's voice hardened. "Others love it; others have dared more for it than he would ever do. It must be a son, my martyrdom must ensure that."

"My darling, why should you fear? We will have the best doctors." He could hardly speak.

"Oh, pain, danger, that is nothing! For a cause I can endure anything. Do not fear for my courage or endurance, but if it does not live, if it should be a girl—" Her voice rose wildly. "I should die of it," she added.

"It will not be a girl," he cried, "and it will not die. We Daventrys are strong to take hold on life. It will be a regular Daventry."

"Of course it must be that," she answered.

Lord Daventry staggered to a chair, his hand on his heart. "If I might live till then," he said huskily. "Then I could truly echo the prayer-book and say, 'Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.'"

Lady Daventry shuddered slightly. The words were terrible in her ears: they were terrible too, in his when he came to think of them.

112 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"Such words, from such a 'servant,'" he muttered. "I who have served the devil all my life, lived but for pleasure and my own will, believed in no God, and yet come in my old age to believe in the just wrath of heaven! If God should yet deal with me as I deserve, take my son as he took David's!"

He put a shaking hand over his eyes.

"You are not old enough for such fears yet," said his wife cynically. "Wait, wait till you lie on your death-bed and the orange is squeezed dry, if you must come to it at all! Repent then if you like, and let things be made safe for you!" Her lips twisted bitterly.

"Hush, Jane, hush, my darling, my wife! Do not say such things, they are terrible from you. Oh, my dear, why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I had to be quite sure. You will take me away?"

"There is nothing in the world I would refuse you. Ask anything, ask anything. If I had a kingdom, all, all would be yours!"

She laid her hands on his shoulders, and looked long and strangely in his eyes. "When I have given you my son (she never said 'your') I shall have a very great request to make; the greatest in the world, my husband. But you will grant it." Her voice was very certain.

"Yes, I will grant it," he answered as certainly.

A few days later they left suddenly for Scotland.

Bruce knew nothing of their plans till they were on the point of departure. Then he asked Lady Daventry for an interview and was refused.

It was not till the castle was empty that he found life, if hateful, yet less hateful. At least his sin was out of sight.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CONFESSION OF POTIPHAR'S WIFE

. . . "She spake unto him saying, 'After this manner did thy servant to me . . .'"—*Genesis*.

THE doctor came quickly down the stairs at Cragness Castle.

At the foot Lord Daventry waited for him, clinging to the bannisters, his face grey and old. He made a sudden, imperious gesture, but he could not speak.

"It is a son," said the famous doctor, "quite a fine child."

But Lord Daventry had still a question he could not put into words.

"Lady Daventry is doing well," said the other, "though at first we feared we could not save them both. You owe your son to the great stoicism, the iron will, of your wife. Lady Daventry is the bravest woman I've ever seen!"

"I may see her?" He darted forward.

"For one minute only, Lord Daventry. She asked for you at once."

There were tears in the old man's eyes as he bent over his wife's pale, anguished face. "Jane, oh, Jane! My darling, my brave darling!" he muttered huskily.

"It is past," she returned, "and I have my son."

The nurse came forward carrying a bundle. "Your lordship would like——" she began.

Lady Daventry closed her eyes, a sick shudder went through her. "Not yet," she muttered, "to-morrow."

Lord Daventry waved the woman away. "Her ladyship will show me my son herself as soon as she is fit," he said. "Till then I do not wish to see him." But that was not the truth, he longed to see the infant who was not only his heir, but child of himself and idolised wife.

114 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

He kissed the pale mother again, and went softly from the room. Downstairs he wept for happiness. He was old, and it was more than he could bear, a joy that reached the heights of agony.

Late the next day he received a message that his wife could see him for half an hour. She had spent her time in sleep, and her youth and marvellous constitution had stood her in good stead. The doctor was delighted with her progress and her returning strength.

The old man bent over her beaming. "Ah, you look ever so much better!" he cried.

Her face set into grim lines. "Yes, I have won," she said, and it seemed an odd speech to both nurse and husband.

"And the son, our son?" he bent lower, smoothing her mass of hair with tremulous fingers.

"The doctor says he is strong and healthy."

"Haven't you seen him, my dearest? Did you wait till we could see him together?"

Her mouth twisted. "I could not bear to see him," she answered.

"You were weak and ill, poor child. But you will look at him now with me?"

Lady Daventry closed her eyes. "If you wish," she said faintly.

He was disappointed. Then he remembered she had suffered greatly, and perhaps it was not unnatural that for a little she should shrink from the cause of it.

So they brought the child.

Lord Daventry, a great exultation, a strange tremor in his heart, looked down upon him, holding his breath, but Lady Daventry kept her eyes closed.

"He is a red Daventry," said the old father, and his voice sounded a little flat.

"The nurse told me he was red." She did not open her eyes.

"His character will be good, but his brains and his achievements will set no world on fire, unless he is different to all the other red Daventrys. Bruce, for instance. I wish he could have been dark."

"So do I!" she answered in an odd stifled tone, "but it was not to be. This is the lesser evil, and—he is your heir."

CONFESSION OF POTIPHAR'S WIFE 115

"My heir and our son, my dearest Jane. I am beginning to wonder if it is not better to have character than great gifts; if it is not goodness, honour, rather than genius, that leads to the way of happiness at the last. The dark Daventrys have had all the pleasure, the red all the happiness, though latterly it has seemed to me that Bruce is a contradiction. He may be good, he does not look happy. This boy is more like a younger brother of his than a son of mine. Look at the eyebrows, just the same fine arch. Well, Bruce, poor devil, is done for!"

His voice cracked on a high note of triumph. "He mocked, oh, I feel sure of it, at my hopes of a son, but he won't mock now, eh, Jane?"

"I do not think he will mock," she answered slowly.

"He will know now why we left so suddenly, lived so quietly up here."

"I think there are many things that will seem plain to him at last."

"The power will be yours and your boy's after my day is done, not his. Yet I am sorry for the lad. I must do what I can to provide for him." His brow furrowed in thought.

Lady Daventry opened her eyes at last. "You will do nothing," she said, "and when I am strong enough I will tell you why. You will send him away, and we will never look upon his face again. He must sink or swim, and he's not the type to swim."

"My dear, I must be just. He's been brought up as my heir, as a rich man's nephew. He can take nothing from you any longer. Need you hate him now?" He did not want hatred to mar his happiness, to come between him and a perfect hour.

"To the bitter end," she answered inexorably.

The nurse was within sight, but not within sound, of her patient, busy tidying in the next room with the door half open. She would have liked to have heard what they were saying out of idle curiosity, but her fear of Lady Daventry was greater than her interest.

"My dear, hate is so cruel; it takes as much from the one who hates as it would fain take from the hated. Love is better, you have me, and there is the boy. Let poor Bruce be!"

116 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

Lady Daventry turned, and her eyes were dreadful. "You say he has taken nothing from me, can take nothing. What if I say that he has taken everything? What if I say he has cheated you? What if I bid you take me back to Daventry the moment I can travel so that I can face my enemy, so that you can cast your vile nephew from your gates!" Her voice rose and her cheeks flushed.

The nurse came at once to the bedside. "You are exciting her ladyship, my lord. Will you leave her to me now?"

Lord Daventry did not answer. He was staring at his wife, dumb horror in his eyes.

Again the nurse voiced her appeal, exerted her authority.

Lady Daventry looked at her coldly. "You may go," she said, "wait in the next room, and shut the door. I have something to say to his lordship which must be said before I can settle. It will not take long."

The woman hesitated. She was afraid of the doctor's anger should he hear of it, but she was more afraid of her patient. She went into the next room, shutting the door after her.

Lord Daventry was breathing heavily. "What do you mean?" he demanded. "A red Daventry . . . for a moment . . ."

His voice faltered, then shook with fury, and he grasped her hand with cruel strength. "Have you betrayed me, woman? Was my honour not safe even with you? Whose child is that?"

He sank into a chair by her side, his fingers plucking at his working lips.

"Lionel, control yourself! You must not be ill! You have this thing to see to, your vengeance to take." Lady Daventry's voice was clear and commanding. Even in that moment she was mistress of the situation. "I have not wronged you; I have been most cruelly, vilely wronged! You are the only man, the only being I have loved in my life; and my bitterest enemy compelled me to betray you. But there is your vengeance——"

She pointed to the cot where the child slumbered.

Lord Daventry tore choking at his collar.

She laid her commanding hand upon his arm. "Lionel, would you hand him over the victory? Control yourself,

CONFESSION OF POTIPHAR'S WIFE 117

I say! It lies between you and him. Are you going to let him succeed in mockery and triumph? Are you going to sheath your sword?"

"I am going to kill him," he answered.

"You cannot do that. The old pitted against the young, and if you could the punishment would be too swift, too easy. I would have it lifelong. I swear on my love for you, and on my love for power, that never have I ceased to hate Bruce Daventry."

"But he is——" he pointed to the cot.

"The father of your heir, yes. He is more than that, for he is the father of the child who will bar him out of Daventry, cast him into the gutter. His sin is its own vengeance. Do you want to know the story? It is hateful, but it must be told. I had noticed a difference in Bruce Daventry, avoided him more, for at times he seemed to look at me covetously, and he was drinking, as you yourself discovered. Then one night as I walked in the woods, I thought I heard footsteps following me, and I was afraid. I turned to go, but he burst through the trees cutting off my retreat and I was alone and helpless . . ."

She recounted a tale of outrage. "He—I do not think he was quite sober," she added.

There was a long pause.

Then the old man bowed his head. "Oh, my God!" he groaned. "My own heir, my nephew!"

"No longer your heir," she reminded him softly.

Lord Daventry's eyes flashed fire. "He shall pay and his bastard too!" He looked with horror towards the cot.

"He can be made to pay through the child."

Lord Daventry made a gesture of dissent.

"I understand," she said. "Of course the innocent must suffer for the guilty. It must be my part to endure yet more, I who have been made to play the bitterest part ever allotted to woman! Very well, Lionel, I do not complain. Only remember this, I have been honest with you. I need have told you nothing, I told you all. You were ready to accept the child as yours, but I would not let you cheat yourself. I cared for you too much. Do you know what this means to me? Can you guess how I hoped to the end the child would bear your image, not his, that I could feel the worst shame had been spared me? Can't you guess

118 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

how I longed to share my burden with you who are so close to me in all, but bore it to spare you? What a relief to me, but what misery to you, to have told you months ago! And the future was hidden. The child might be yours; it might be dead; I might die myself. The moment I knew the worst had happened, I told you all. You can cast me out in company with that man and the child, have the country ringing with your shame, the neighbours laughing at the deceived old man, for of course they will not believe my story. Why should they? So let it be, Lionel, and we will both bear our bitterness alone. Mine will be the hardest, for I am innocent, yet guilty. Nature and fate decrees that it is always the woman to suffer and to pay, and the innocent to suffer most."

"Hush, Jane! You shall not suffer. I could not have believed another woman, but I believe you. If you are lying, may everything you value be taken from you!"

"Amen," she answered. "I hated him always. I would not face the possibility of the child being his. Now I have got to face it. You must be my judge as you must be my avenger. I suppose there is no more to be said. You can turn him away for to-day, but to-morrow he must come back to Daventry as its lord, and to a reigning Daventry much is forgiven. We will send the child away, give out that it is dead. Everything can be arranged to secure the future for the legitimate heir."

Lord Daventry wrestled with his own surging passions, struggled for calmness. When he spoke at last, he had conquered himself, and there was something dead in his voice.

He bent over his wife, looked piercingly into her eyes. "You should have told me before," he said accusingly.

"It was a daily temptation to do so. For your sake I conquered it. It has always been my part to spare you."

"My God! If you could have spared me now!"

"And let that man remain your friend and confidant?"

"No, no! Jane, you have taken the right way, it must have been terrible for you, my poor darling! But what are we to do, what are we to do?" It was a confession of weakness.

"The weapon is to your hand."

"Ay, a poisoned weapon."

"It will make the deadlier wound."

"For whom, Jane, for whom?"

"We can both hate the instrument; but we can use it!"

"Your son, if he is not mine. Can you use him so, make flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone, your pawn?"

"A child in whom I have no part. A child of violence and shame! Let him do his part, let him stand between his father and his heritage. If you wish it I will go. I will not stay to be regarded as a light woman or a sinner. I am queen or nothing, as I have been in the past. It is for you to say. You are settling this thing, not I. It is but for me to bow my head to your decision, whatever it may be."

Lord Daventry began to cry. "God knows I do not blame you, my poor victimised darling," he sobbed at length, "but I think my heart is broken." For an instant senile old age looked out of his face.

"He is still a Daventry," the woman said at length, "he can be brought up to be what you wish, to succeed you worthily, more worthily than that other. Or he can be sent away, later 'die' to the world. The choice is yours. I do not seek to influence it. Do what you think is best for yourself and place me outside of it all. After all, I am no Daventry by blood, and it is the name and honour of your race you should put first. Even vengeance must give way to that."

Lord Daventry rose. His tears had ceased. He stood by her side and lifted up his hand, a figure of implacable vengeance. "I have made my choice," he said, "the child is my heir, and the heir of Daventry. With Bruce I will deal face to face and as his crime deserves. God may forgive him, or forget, but I will never forgive or forget, in this world or the next."

Then he sat down, and there was a long silence.

Lady Daventry closed her eyes, and lay with content on her lovely, perfect face. She had not doubted her success, but she had doubted her physical endurance, and she could not wait another day to lay the train of her vengeance. Again the iron will had conquered the shrinking flesh. She had sold her soul to the devil, but her Master had not withheld payment, and she was well satisfied. Neither devil nor man had cheated her. There was nothing she wished undone in that hour of triumph.

120 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"Bruce shall go, shall go at once!" muttered Lord Daventry at length. "I will go to Daventry to-morrow, and he shall see, he shall see . . . I will show him how his crime has ruined him. He will go out of the place a beggar, and the sooner he dies of drink the better. He is done for! I tell you he is done for!" His voice rose shrilly.

"Yes," said Lady Daventry soothingly, "you will be too strong for him, you will win easily. But you must not go just yet, not till you can take me with you. I will stay by you during the interview. I dare not let you over-excite yourself. And he will not dare to lie, to trump up false tales, when I stand there and witness against him."

"No, no, you cannot be there! Such a thing would be horrible, impossible!"

"It will be justice," she insisted, "and it will be safer for you."

He said no more, and she knew the victory hers. Then she consented to let physical weakness claim her, and sank deeper into her pillows, her face pallid with exhaustion. "Go now," she murmured faintly, "and ring for nurse."

Lord Daventry, the victimiser of many women, now himself a victim of a woman worse than any he had known, went down to his study.

He sat alone in the dark hour that had seen his joy turned to torture, his glory to shame, his triumph to defeat. "Ashes, ashes," he muttered heavily, his mouth writhing as if the taste of them was upon his lips.

Only Jane was left, and his bitter two-edged vengeance.

CHAPTER XV

ACCUSED AND ACCUSER

"Guilt to the victor—to the vanquished shame!"—BULWER-LYTTON.

PEOPLE gazed curiously at Bruce Daventry as he passed down the village street, his face pale, his lips compressed. No one greeted him; it would have seemed an intrusion, for there was that in his face which set him apart, as a thing tormented is set apart from happy humanity.

"He's taking it hard," said one.

"By Jove! No wonder!" said another. "The heir to all, and now nothing! Just the servant where he would have been master, a beggar instead of great wealth. This possibility was never taken into consideration, and it does seem odd. Then it's been kept so dark, and just sprung on us. It must seem like the end of the world to Bruce Daventry."

"All the same I am surprised at the way Daventry is taking it," returned the first thoughtfully, "he's quite changed lately. He might have lost his own soul as well as his worldly prosperity. He's like a man without hope, or without a future. Is it true that he has taken to drink like his father? If not, where's his pluck?"

"Oh, he'll have pluck enough when the thing wears off a little. But man, it's come like a bolt from the blue! Give him time to steady up."

"He needn't look as if he wanted to hang himself because Daventry is gone: besides, the kid may die, an old man's child. Daventry is young, and he isn't a fool; his uncle will provide for him. The old reprobate is generous enough."

The subject of this conversation passed on out of sight,

the pealing joy-bells sounding to him like the crash of doom. His friends and acquaintances thought he was thinking over the lost inheritance; he was not thinking of it at all. That would come later. At present only a great horror, a great fear, gripped him by the throat. He had never faced such a possibility; he dare not face it now. It was the unspeakable thing. It could not, should not be.

As he passed the vicarage gates, the twins and the orphan fell out upon him with excited exclamations. He did not hear or heed their greeting. He heard nothing but the bells. In the first flush of his exultation, the old peer had ordered that they should ring for a week, and there should be feasting, and rejoicing, and the village en fête. He had sent a large sum of money and his orders to his lawyer. The village had rejoiced for six days, and flags and bunting were flying everywhere on the breeze. It seemed to Bruce that the bells had rung by night as well as day, and had deafened everything in life. He could never again hear the joy-bells ringing without wincing and remembering that terrible time.

"The bells! The bells!" cried Meg, jumping delightedly.

"The new lady has got a new baby," screamed Dosé joyfully. She adored babies blindly. She grabbed his hand.

"Let me go, Dosé, I am in a hurry." He tried to free himself from the tenacious clasp.

But she grabbed his leg instead. "The Woman heard from the nurse what knows her, an' she says its hair is wed."

Bruce staggered slightly; then hoarsely he bid the child let him go.

She took no notice. "When I'm growed I shall have lots an' lots of babies," she announced positively, "but not wed ones. Wed hair is nasty." She looked disparagingly at the orphan's flaming locks. "I like yours, Buce," she added admiringly.

Bruce's face flushed darkly, then he almost flung the child from him, and hurried on.

Dosé lay down on the grass and wept. After due consideration Meg and the orphan followed her example. Bruce no longer cared about them.

Meanwhile Bruce, sick at heart, sick with shame, sat

in his own study, his bowed head on his arms. His shattered ideals seemed to press round him. To what unimaginable depths he had fallen. Till the coming of Lady Daventry he had worn "the white flower," been perhaps a little too conscious of his difference from many. What had he come to wear in the end? Where among the men he had despised in his vain folly, was one who had stooped so low? The ghost of his ideals raised its white mocking face and gibed at him.

His man, Thompson, came in, reminded him his meal was getting cold, and he said, as he had said only too often lately: "I do not want anything to eat, bring me the tantalus and the soda-water."

Thompson obeyed reluctantly. "It's enough to knock a fellar over," he thought sympathetically, "an' cheek I call it, 'im 'avin' babbies at 'is age. But the young master's been goin' to pieces afore this turn-down, an' 'e don't look like pullin' up neither! Now that she-devil will 'ave it all 'er own way, bad luck to 'er an' 'er kid! No wonder the master 'ates 'er, can't abear to 'ave her spoke of even! She's put us nicely in the soup, she 'as that, with 'er brat! There'll be no 'oldin' the ol' lord ater this!"

Bruce received no direct communication from his uncle, which rather astonished him, and he could not bring himself to write, so that it was not till about three weeks later that any communication was exchanged between Lord Daventry and his late heir. Then Bruce received a curt line. "We shall be back to-night. Come and see me at ten-thirty to-morrow. I have something to say to you, something to show you."

"Something to show you," the young man repeated, in a dazed fashion. "My God! not——!"

He sent a verbal message saying he would be there, and spent the hours before the interview in a far from enviable state of mind. He felt like one who went to face his Nemesis. Death would have been nothing, he would have welcomed it, but to meet the eyes of the man he had dishonoured, to play a part that filled him with nausea! His uncle would never know, nobody would know save he and one other, but his own knowledge was enough. He could imagine no deeper degradation. He had deceived, and he must go on deceiving.

He must play the part that appalled him, and play it as long as life lasted. There would be no end to this deceit. The old man must not guess his own black dishonour, that would be unbearable; the woman must be saved from the consequences of her weakness.

It became horrible to think of Lady Daventry, more horrible to imagine her position and torment. It was enough to kill any woman. He had not loved her, though her beauty had driven him mad, he had hated her and the chains she had cast round him, but now his heart contracted in pity. Terrible indeed for him, but far, far more terrible for her. She might blame herself a little, come to realise that her own mad love, her passionate abandonment, had proved their undoing as much as his own passion. He would not have sought her, tempted her, but though he could fight himself he could not fight her battle too. He had been the tempted, not the tempter: the weak, not the strong. He saw it clearly now. He could only pray she might never come to see it.

She would look to him for love and pity to bear her cross, and he had no love to give, and not very much pity. Dead passion had left a sick disgust behind it. He loathed himself, but he loathed her too; she had not helped to the keeping of the ideal; she had destroyed it. There was something doubly shameful in this distaste for the woman who had loved so generously, risked all for love of him. Whatever came or went, he must stand by her now, count no sacrifice too great for her sake. There seemed nothing he could do, he could not put back the universe, but if there was, she had but to name it. Her slightest wish should be law.

Only he could not, would not, stay in the neighbourhood, be agent any longer, and he would not look upon the child lest his worst fears be realised.

The spirit he drank left his head clear, but his walk, to a close observer, would have betrayed him. And it was a man with haunted eyes who went up the drive to his ordeal, and to pay the first great price of his sin.

His footsteps dragged as he entered the hall, but Lord Daventry waiting in the library heard them, and his face changed.

Lady Daventry, looking a little older, a little harder, a

little colder, laid a warning hand upon her husband's. "It is your life," she said urgently. "You must be calm. You have faced the worst; you can face this. It is only a matter of dealing out vengeance."

Lord Daventry nodded, fought down his rising passion, and was sitting calmly in his chair, his wife standing by his right side, a cradle on his left, when, white, and haggard and speechless, Bruce came into the room, shutting the door behind him.

Even in his own agitation, Bruce was struck by the great change in his uncle. When last he had seen him he had been wonderfully strong and young for his years, now he was a very old man. While he caught his breath and wondered, the thing happened.

Lord Daventry had offered no hand, no word of greeting, his old face had set like a livid mask.

He waved his hand towards the cradle, and his voice was very terrible as he said :

"I thought it well you should see . . . your son."

With a choking sound, Bruce reeled against the mantelpiece, held to it desperately, his face ghastly.

There was a long dreadful silence, no movement, no sound, only naked passions under the whip. Lord Daventry looked at the haggard, miserable wreck of what had been his handsome young nephew, and then quickly turned away again. Lady Daventry looked straight in front of her, her face devoid of all expression.

The silence grew more tense. Then suddenly the child stirred in the cot.

"Come, I must introduce you." Lord Daventry had burst out laughing. "Your son, and my heir. Ex-heir, and father!" He laughed louder. "You don't look interested. Do babies bore you? But surely this one won't. He means so much, you see. He is not only your son but the weapon of my vengeance. He will bar you and yours out of Daventry for all time. It doesn't matter what he is, it doesn't matter what he does, he will probably drink himself to death like father and grandfather, but he will at least have served his purpose."

He paused and again there was silence. The child broke it with a little whimper.

Bruce remained motionless.

The old man turned to his wife. He had stopped laughing, but his muscles were twitching in a travesty of mirth. "Show him his son, my Lady Daventry," he commanded.

She took up the child, it was the first time she had touched him, and held him under the young man's eyes. "Look upon your sin, Bruce Daventry," she said very softly.

For one moment he obeyed, and the red-haired sleeping child so fatally like himself, seemed, like his own sin, monstrous and hideous beyond all words.

He shuddered and looked away.

Lady Daventry put back the child who began to cry impatiently, and rang the bell. The nurse entered, and lifting up the cot, left the room.

"So you have seen my heir, Bruce," observed Lord Daventry, "but I still await your congratulations. I suppose we should have asked you to be god-father, but we have taken the liberty of calling him Philip without reference to you."

"I make no defence: it is beyond that," said the sinner dully. "That you should have found out makes it little worse. Nothing can make it worse. I acknowledge my infamy, all that you can say or do. You will not find me whine in the face of my punishment. It will be a relief. You have found me out, and I believe I am glad you know. At least I need not add hypocrisy to the rest."

Lord Daventry smiled. "I did not find you out," he said, "your victim told me everything. And I am proud of her courage and her truth." He laid his hand on his wife's arm.

"My victim?" echoed Bruce stupidly.

"She told me everything. You were scarcely sober, it seems, yet even so you cannot forget that night in the woods——"

"I forget nothing! I wish to God I could!" burst from the young man passionately.

Lady Daventry looked the stricken man between the eyes. "I could not live a lie," she said very clearly. "I could not deceive the man who loved and trusted me. So I told him all. I was ready to pay what price he chose. He was to be my judge, his own avenger. He forgave me——"

"Hush, Jane, there can never be any question of forgiveness between you and me——" Lord Daventry broke in quickly.

"I could have left his house with your son," the woman went on quietly, "have acknowledged the dishonour, but he would not have that. He chose another weapon, and it was not for me to decry this choice. He said your living son should be your avenger. The child, except to us three, is his, will reign here when he is dead, will oust you from Daventry."

"It is terrible, but it is just."

"He has heard my side; he has not heard yours. Have you nothing to say, no excuse to make? Let us conduct this tribunal justly. If you wish to enact the part of Adam, the ever popular male part, and say, 'the woman tempted me,' do not let my presence deter you. He shall judge between us, weigh your story and mine——"

"Oh hush!" cried the young man in horror, his face averted. "How could I say such a thing!"

He turned to his uncle. "I have no excuse to offer, sir," he said quietly. "The sin is mine. I alone am responsible. It is just that the punishment should be mine also."

"You will leave here at once, a disgraced man," said the old peer inexorably. "You have flung away your inheritance, and you have flung away your name. I shall say you have cheated me. God knows that's true enough. People will draw their own conclusions, and you, you will offer no denial, sir! You will take what is yours, but no more, and as long as I live, and as long as my son lives, not a penny will come to you from Daventry. As a beggar and a thief you will go from here." The speaker's voice rose, his face worked with fury.

Bruce might have spoken of a burden greater than he could bear: he did not speak at all.

"Go, go, and see what you are worth in the market of the world!"

Bruce made no reply.

"You will drink yourself to death, probably starve. You are half-drunk already!"

Bruce was stung into retort by an accusation too near the truth. "I shall live by my pen," he said, "and I shall not drink."

"Live by your pen!" Lord Daventry broke into a mocking laugh. "Then I am fully revenged! For you will not live by your pen, my impotent genius, you will starve by it, because there is nothing behind it but ink. And just ink is no more to-day than it was yesterday. Fleet Street will welcome you all right, to its gutters. There is always room there!"

"There is always room too, at the top!" cried Bruce desperately. Everything had gone but the pen he loved, and to that he clung with desperate tenacity. That too should not be taken from him. Fate could not be as bitter as that. No, by his pen he would win redemption. Out of the depths it should speak for him, out of the depths it should raise him at the last, bring him a new name, a new life, a new honour.

But Lord Daventry, merciless critic, went on laughing, "'Room at the top!' The catch-phrase of mediocrity never to get through the press at the bottom! Room at the top, for you!"

Lady Daventry laughed too, shrugging her shapely shoulders. "You will not succeed," she said certainly. "There are faces that tell me that whatever the owner sets out to do, that he will do, but yours is not one of them. Yours has only failure written, and yet more failure, and 'unstable as water thou shalt not excel.'"

"I will at least fight till I drop," said Bruce fiercely. "And," he added with boyish defiance, "my stuff has been taken when it was necessary, why won't it be taken now?"

"Because it is necessary," returned Lord Daventry with cruel irony, "and such is the law of life, and of Fleet Street! Have you anything further to say?" He rose from his chair.

"Nothing."

Lord Daventry clenched his hands. His vengeance was proving an inert thing. He wanted to flagellate shrinking, resisting flesh, but Bruce bared his back to the lash, and said ever, "Strike on! It is just!"

"It is stated that 'in nature there are no rewards or punishment: there are consequences,'" he burst out, "and it's true, by God, it's true! How do you like your consequences, man? You have lost everything in the world. What have you got in return, what is the price of

your sin? Shame! Beggary! Hatred! Do you think even my hatred can compare with the hatred of Lady Daventry?"

Then Bruce turned, and for the first time looked at the woman who had ruined him. "Do you hate me?" he asked quietly.

She looked straight into his eyes, and he read things there which struck him dumb. He saw it all now.

"You can ask your victim that!" burst out Lord Daventry, choking.

But Lady Daventry was speaking. "Never for a day, or an hour, since we first met, have I ceased to hate you!" she said with cold, clear hatred in her voice.

The awful and bitter truth rushed over Bruce in a tide, he drowned beneath its dark waters. And he knew himself the dupe of unimaginable villainy.

He did not speak for a long time, and when he did, his voice had horror and loathing in it. He turned blindly towards the door. "Now I know," he said, "the meaning of the word 'victim.'"

CHAPTER XVI

THE LAST OF DAVENTRY

"Fortune and Hope, farewell!"—MERIVALE.

"MY nephew has deceived and cheated me," said Lord Daventry, "and I am compelled to send him away. He is no longer kin of mine, and I must ask you to be good enough to remember it." And he went out of the local club without another word.

For a long while no one said anything, and then suddenly everyone began to speak at once. A few stood up for Bruce, but many more spoke against him, and remembered that he had become morose, unfriendly, and given to drink.

"In his sober senses he is incapable of cheating—I presume money was meant—but drunk, who knows?" exclaimed one.

"That's the trouble," said a friend regretfully, shrugging his shoulders, "there's no doubt drink soon saps the moral fibre."

"Well, he's done for!" was the general verdict, and the local gentry went home to tell their wives all about it.

"Women will gossip," or "Women do love gossip," these worthy gentlemen said apologetically to each other. "You know what they are!" So all the gossip circulated and invented at the men's club was taken zealously home.

Mr. Lister was one of the first to hear the news. He remembered the twins were overfond of young Daventry. Seeing he was no longer the heir, and a discreditable person, as a Christian and a gentleman keeping to the narrow path of righteousness, it behoved him to forbid his children to speak to the sinner.

They listened with pale, solemn faces, and wide, staring eyes, while their father dared to tell them that Bruce, no

man, but god, was wicked and a thief, and they were to have nothing further to do with him.

The orphan demanded, with some interest, the meaning of the word thief.

"A scoundrel who steals what isn't his, takes something belonging to another," thundered the man of right and wrath.

"Then you stealed my gold farden what I wallered," accused the orphan shrilly, "an' you is a 'toundrel!" Young O'Hara at no period of his existence feared God, devil, or man, or even Mr. Lister.

He was cast forth with some violence by his irate and insulted grandfather, who then turned to the others.

"Now you hear me, Margaret, and you also Dorothea?" If Meg obeyed him, Dosé would obey Meg, he knew that, but this time it was "the gift of God" who flung down the gauntlet. "I won't!" she announced, white with determination.

"Dorothea!"

Mr. Lister could not believe the evidence of his own eyes, and even Meg was amazed.

"I won't!" said that small person again. "Buce is not bad, he's good; he's gooder than God, he loves us an' gives us fings to eat."

"You bad child! You shall go to bed at once without any supper, and your step-mother shall——"

"I'll kick the Woman," announced Dosé, trembling at the forces pitted against her, "if she calls Buce bad."

Mr. Lister administered a sharp slap which the child took stoically. "Be quiet! And remember you will never speak to the wretched man who has cheated his good, kind uncle."

"The lord isn't good," said Meg indignantly, "he's nice, but he isn't good. An' he said to the groom . . ." She repeated an oath glibly.

"If Lord Daventry lost his temper with a stupid servant there must have been reason. This young reprobate has no excuse, and he is running away from his own disgrace."

"I will speak to Buce an' love him always," was Dosé's firm announcement.

"You will go to your room and stay there. Was ever man so tried!" He seized his offspring roughly, hurried

132 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

them upstairs and into their own room, shooting the outside bolt which had been put there for such purpose. "No supper," he repeated angrily, and hurried down to his own meal which he ate with avidity.

He had however forgotten the orphan, now a precocious child of three. That young gentleman took himself with speed to the room he shared with his aunts, and held a stealthy conversation through the door. After a little while he dragged, with much panting and effort, a chair out of a neighbouring compartment, and, climbing upon it, triumphantly shot back the bolt with his strong ugly little hands.

"Come out, you blighters!" he said in language learned of Tom.

They came out, put back the chair, and crept cautiously down the stairs and out at the gate. They reached the agent's house as dusk deepened.

Bruce was alone, packing up his possessions.

Dosé reaching him first tumbled weeping into his arms. "It isn't true," she cried, "you isn't a thief, an' you isn't wunnin' away like he said!" She clung to him feverishly.

The young man's face contracted. "It's true, darling," he said in a low voice, "I'm a sinner, Dosé, a very miserable and ashamed sinner."

Meg, mindful of services they had recently been compelled to attend, eyed him incredulously. "You can only be a miserable sinner in church," she said triumphantly, "an' you haven't gone to church and isn't a miserable sinner. So there!"

He sighed. "I am, all the same."

He looked so wretched, that after eyeing him in horror, the three children wept long and loudly, and he had to comfort them.

Meg dried her eyes the first. "Well, you'll have to get good," she said decidedly.

"I shall have to reap what I have sown," he returned gloomily; and seeing they could not be expected to understand, added, "You see you've got to be punished for your sins, babies."

"Not if you unbolt the door," said the orphan beaming with pride. He related the incident.

Bruce sighed and smiled. "But there is nobody to unbolt the door of the prison I have made for myself," he said.

"I will," said Dosé eagerly, "an' if it's too tall to be reached with a chair, I'll wait till I've growed ever so high."

He looked into the adoring eyes and sighed again, turning away. "Ah well, Dosé, maybe there's a key after all," he answered, and thought of the magic of the pen.

The children realised that he was indeed in trouble, and that he was going away. With due earnestness, the orphan gave him his best caterpillar for a keepsake, and Meg insisted on him taking a bright new shilling she had shaken out of the missionary-box.

But Dosé—Dosé had nothing to give him but a baptism of tears, and a young and faithful heart. She crept very close to him, her wet cheek against his, and swore that never, never would she forget him, or cease to love him for a moment.

"An' I shall make up pwayers an' put you in!" she added importantly.

"Where is you goin'?" demanded Margaret curiously.

"To London, to Fleet Street."

"The place the lord said I'd go to?"

"Did he?"

"When I'm growed I shall come too," announced Dosé.

"I hope not. I think you are made for happier things, my dear."

"When I'm growed I shall come an' live with you."

"You will change your mind ere that day comes."

"Will you buy me lots of fwocks, an' cakes, an' sweets? You is rich, isn't you?"

"No, Dosé, I have nothing left, not even that thing called honour, or hope."

"Then I will give you my pennies," she said happily.

"There's the missonawy-box," added Margaret, "only it takes a lot of shakin', an' it has to be when the Woman and father is out."

He started a lecture on honesty, and then stopped abruptly. Who was he to talk of right and wrong? He broke off in the middle, and said he would take them home.

134 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

It was the last time, for he was leaving early next morning, and he said he would carry them back in turn. But it ended with him carrying Dosé all the way.

Then at the vicarage gates, his heart very sick and sore, he kissed them good-bye, and went back quickly to his packing.

Early the next morning he drove to the new life. He glanced for the last time at the castle, which, grim, and grey and dark, looked down on him coldly from its stately eminence. An agony of regret and longing for his lost inheritance rushed over him. Then deliberately he turned his back to it and was driven off, leaving the old life, and the might-have-been, behind.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CITY OF DIS-ENCHANTMENT

"Not for us are content and quiet, and peace of mind,
For we go seeking a city that we shall never find."—MASEFIELD.

IT was with a confidence results were not to justify, that Bruce Daventry flung himself upon the mercy of Fleet Street, a street that knows not mercy. Rather must its devotees be prepared to abide by a somewhat rough and bare justice, and to find its law, the law of taking, not giving. He knew the place as the street of adventure, of mystery, magic, and imagination. He knew of its few successes; of its countless failures he was ignorant.

Its outward semblance was familiar enough, many of its turnings, its big publishing concerns, but of its inner and real self he knew nothing. He was going to seek it now for the first time in his life. In his own comfortable country home, removed from toil and tumult, and the crude problem of his daily bread, it had shone in vistas as the City of Delight.

He stood there dreaming, thinking of the great geniuses who had walked where he was walking, envying them most passionately their immortal gift, seeing himself winning in a lesser degree something of what they had won.

But he never saw, drifting like derelicts past him, broken lives, other might-have-beens; the hopeless eyes, the shuffling shambling feet. Failures cried to him from the depths of that crowded haunted city, but he never saw them, never heard them. He had failed in honour and manhood, he was beggared of wealth and place, he was outcast and ashamed, but he saw only the old, old mocking mirage, the laurel crown!

Why not? Why not? A thousand more unlikely

things had happened. He was young, and rich in talent.

His thoughts ran burningly, swiftly ; it was only when he sought to bind them by pen or utterance that they halted a little, sounded somehow less genius-born.

Genius !

His face flamed suddenly. What a word to conjure with ! A rising sea sounded in his ears, the portals of death swung backwards, and the immortal dead hailed him as fellow, touched him with fingers clinging like the pale wild seaweed, bade him suffer and be strong.

And then the vision passed, and there were only the grey streets, and the tired, grey faces. But the poor dumb fool, the unhappy, inarticulate genius, had had his moment, and was spared the bitter knowledge that his talent was only a petty thing, and genius set high and far apart from all his days.

A talent and a lifetime spent in the study of humanity will do much, will make a good book, but genius will make a better, and make it more swiftly and more surely. The work of the one will delight for a day, but the work of the other will delight for ever.

Talent is that which learns : genius is that which knows. Talent can be fostered, brought to fruition ; it can also be killed. Genius is that which nothing can kill, and only disease or death can steal away.

Talent is for a day and its possessor ; genius is for all time, and for all the world. Talent builds, genius creates. The first runs on swift sure feet, but the second is a Valkyrie-ride, the sweep of a tempest. It ascends to the azure vault of heaven, it surges to the pit of hell.

To its owner talent is a blessing, a comfortable thing, a faithful servant : genius is a sickness, a curse, a tyranny. To read of genius is to read of tragedy, of those with their eyes on the stars, and their feet in the Place of Despair. Yet every artist who takes himself seriously would claim for himself this unenviable thing. He thinks he needs but opportunity to prove his genius ; but genius does without opportunity. It does not pass from generation to generation as other, and normal things, pass. It is an abnormality, and it rises abnormally from strange, unlikely, and barren soil. It is spoken of lightly and easily enough, too lightly and too easily, and every popular mediocrity

has the label attached some time or other, but the real thing is neither understood nor understandable. It comes and it goes in many strange guises, but it is neither to have nor to hold, nor to be bound by the earthly decrees of man. It is a magic and a mystery; a question without an answer.

Who knows how it has come into being? It passes by palaces, the houses of those socially and intellectually great, and pauses by the side of some commonplace pregnant mother. That woman brings forth a changeling child, to seem in her world, yet never to be of it.

Yet in his ignorance and folly, Bruce Daventry sought this thing, would have added its thorns to the thorns of his sin. He would be another Stevenson, start as humbly as he, work on as bravely, smile as gallantly at death. His articles, his essays, were but the start; the great book was yet to come, and should be most nobly born.

Then slowly he came back to everyday life, to realities, to the street of failure.

He turned his steps to the office of *The Old Brigade*, since it was by such means he must climb, and live. When there had been no necessity for it, he had had a few articles accepted by this organ and paid for, consequently, now there was the necessity, he would have more accepted and more paid for. It sounded logic, and perhaps it was, only it didn't happen to be the logic of Fleet Street.

The Old Brigade was the organ of a passing generation. The youthful mind thought it dull and not up-to-date. It ignored Atheism, Socialism, and the sex-problem. It believed, what a certain type of mind can always bring itself to believe, in the comfortable thing. The unpleasant, the pitiful, the crude realities, became non-existent. It held by all the shibboleths of the Conservative landowners, and had never been known to admire a Liberal statesman or anything that was his. When everybody who was anybody had been a Tory, its power and its circulation had been large. But alas! the old order changeth, and the circulation of the once prosperous paper brought no smile to the face of editor or owner. The old supporters were dropping off, and the new generation were running after newer gods. If not yet extinct, it was slowly and surely dying. Lord Daventry had continued his

138 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

subscription, but he had laughed a little at the pedantic organ, and even more at the pedantic stilted articles and essays signed "Bruce Daventry."

Bruce however believed the paper as important in the world of Fleet Street as it had been in his own, and the dingy approach to its very dingy and shabby offices came upon him as a shock.

The editor, a big, untidy man, was another shock. He had to look up what Bruce had written before he could call his contributions to mind, and he seemed to think there was a big difference between the value of an essay written by the heir to Daventry and that of a nobody who intended to live by a halting pen.

He warned Bruce that if he trusted to live by his pen he would have to face starvation. "Your articles are well thought out, but they lack real interest, distinction, originality. To be quite frank, they are no better, if no worse, than an article written by any educated man, with no more than education behind him. Of course we will consider your contributions as usual. I can't say any more than that."

He was as good as his word. He accepted two, but he sent back all the rest.

This was the first of a series of disappointments that descended thick and fast upon Bruce. The world that he had expected to take by storm would have none of him. It labelled him at once "mediocrity." His contributions came back promptly, not always with thanks. His attempt at short-story writing was an utter fiasco. Imaginary plots and people would have nothing to say to him; they would not "come alive" even for himself. There was one story he could have written, and written well; the tale that most could write if they dare, his own story. He could have told that in burning, living words; but it was the thing he sought, though vainly, to hide and forget. It was too hideous for anything but the ash-pit of memory.

If only he could forget for one day! Was not failure dogging his footsteps enough, that sin must cling too?

His tortured nerves were also treating him badly. He had drunk hard for months, and he had to face the consequences now. Always the consequences! There seemed no end to them. He had not cared for the stuff itself, he

had taken it merely to drown misery, and shame, and remorse, but now his blood began to crave for it, and his father's curse laid hold upon him. He fought against it because of a child's trusting blue eyes, but he grew daily more unhinged under the strain.

If there had only been something or somebody to stand by his side! If the work at which he slaved so unceasingly would repay him for all he expended upon it! If the goal would grow nearer instead of always a little farther. But there was nothing, nobody; there was only failure after failure, a memory that would not let him rest by day, and mocked his sleep at night. In a word, there was hell.

There arrived a day too when it seemed as if matters had come to an unbearable head, as if he could endure in silence no longer, but must shriek his story aloud.

And on that day the letter came.

He recognised the writing at once, and a sick shudder shook him as he contemplated it. What had the woman who had ruined him to say to her victim? How dare she write at all? Was she about to order him back to her feet again?

"Not that, by God!" he exclaimed violently aloud as he tore open the letter.

Then he laughed and flung it down. It had been forwarded through the post-office where he had sent his address, and was just a business note written in the third person.

"Lady Daventry presents her compliments to Mr. Daventry, and would be obliged if he would be so good as to return the keys of the small writing desk in the office, as the new agent has asked for them, and they cannot be found. Lady Daventry is under the impression that Mr. Daventry may have inadvertently packed the keys among his own possessions, and will be obliged if he will give his early attention to the matter."

That was all, but it served to push an unhinged man closer to the brink of brain-fever.

He knew the spirit that had actuated it, the undying hate. He realised the cruel pleasure she had found in writing thus, instead of leaving the task to her secretary. She wanted him to remember her power and her victory, to

feel her scourge wherever he might be. She was letting him see that he was not to escape her.

He found the keys at the bottom of a box he had not till then unpacked, and sent them direct to the agent's house.

But to Lady Daventry herself he wrote for the first and the last time, and in that piece of writing there was virility at least, the virility of fury and of the bitter befooled sinner. In letters of fire, in words that spared not decency, in facts too brutal for utterance, he traced the whole history of their intercourse, and the net she had spread for him. And every sentence burned with truth, and shame, and horror.

"You shall see yourself, for once, just what you are, my Lady Daventry," he added. "You shall read in crude language the vileness that is lower than any vileness conceived in the heart of man, take at least this share of your sin. I have taken all the rest. You, who have used hatred and craft to such an obscene purpose, do not think to escape the cost. Only 'the fool hath said in his heart there is no God.' I know there is, and I know the God that has so punished me will yet deal His justice to you and yours. There is God and there are consequences ; between them you shall not escape. If your secret is safe on earth, it is not safe in heaven. Shall not He strike down the thing He has made for very shame of such a creation ? So I leave you to your place and power, false wife, false mistress, to your God, and to the sword of time."

Then he sealed the packet and posted it, and returned with strange confusion in his brain.

That night he was taken dangerously ill. For days he was in the grip of brain-fever, and very close to the cutting of the knot.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LAST OF LIONEL, TENTH LORD DAVENTRY

"Death is the greatest evil, because it cuts off hope."—HAZLITT.

"Debts belong to the next heir."—*German Proverb.*

LORD DAVENTRY looked up listlessly from his writing-table as the butler brought in the evening post. He was not feeling well; he had not felt well since his wife's revelation: he knew his grip on life to be very far from sure, felt his age in every weary bone of him. Only his keen, grim intellect lived on as strong as ever.

The butler closed the door, and Lord Daventry reaching for the small, sharp dagger he had brought from Damascus for such purpose, slit open his letters, his face white with boredom. He was always bored when Lady Daventry was not with him, and she had gone out for a brief stroll round the bordered lawns. While he waited for her to return, he threw his letters peevishly aside. Adam Ffiffe had not written as he had hoped. It was strange how fond he was of that boy, how he still hankered to see him at Daventry! His face darkened. It was well enough that little Philip Daventry should keep Bruce out of his heritage; it was not well that Adam should also suffer.

"The innocent for the guilty, as usual," muttered Lord Daventry. "God's vengeance, or nature's. A rough one, at any rate!"

Then he started violently, for among the pile of letters by his side was one in Bruce's handwriting, and it was addressed to the woman he had victimised.

This was intolerable. The blood rushed to Lord Daventry's face, and he seized the letter, slashing it open. He tore out the contents with shaking fingers. Jane should not be pestered with the fellow. He would not even tell

142 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

Jane, she had had enough to bear, poor, brave darling. He would see to it himself, answer it as he thought fit.

So he read it, word for word, page for page, in all its nakedness, in all its horror, and knew that that human document, the accusation of Bruce Daventry, was true.

"False mistress! False wife!" he echoed, and his head fell forward.

It is possible that one who, with unshakable faith, bleeding feet, daily and hourly sacrifice, had followed a Christ all the days of his life, to find that Christ in the hour of death a mocking fantasy, and heaven but a chimera, might suffer as Lord Daventry suffered: he could not suffer more.

His face went grey, and there was something appalling, something uncanny, in the violent silence of the room. It was the silence of the last dread things.

He sat there without moving, without speaking, scarcely breathing, and as he sat thus, lo! the room was not empty of all else after all, for a dark, shadowy figure stood by his side, and he looked up into the inscrutable eyes of Death.

The Presence put out a hand towards him, a hand like a great suffocating blackness, but Lord Daventry, indomitable to the last, flung it back for an instant. Die he must, but there was something to be done first. The sweat ran off his face as he turned to his desk, and it was the victory of a grim will over dying flesh, which enabled him to hold the pen.

On a piece of paper he scrawled, "This is the truth, see you to it," and enclosed it with Bruce's letter in an envelope on which he wrote, "To be given to Philip, Eleventh Lord Daventry, on his twenty-first birthday, from Lionel, tenth Lord Daventry." This he put in yet another envelope which he addressed to his lawyer and sealed, placing it among the legal documents in his desk with which that official would deal upon the death of his client.

This accomplished, his vengeance left to time and to the character of a boy, he held out his arms towards death, and his eyes spoke plainly, "Strike! End this torture!"

But Death smiled his inscrutable smile, and retreated. To him the seeker was nothing, the fleeing quarry all.

There was no hurry, and so, though it filled the room with its shadow, it drew no nearer.

So Lord Daventry had time to look at what others had done, and at what he himself was doing. He was leaving his wife where she stood, so that the end might be more bitter. He was striking, not only at her, but at the innocent, base-born child, and he was striking too at Bruce whom he hated, and all that should be his in the years to come. What these three held dearest, what they had won, justly or unjustly, would be taken away. The Nemesis that would take close on twenty-one years to become full-grown would be a giant in the land by that time.

He would take from all.

"The Lord gave, the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord!" exclaimed the wretched old man, profaning death.

If Philip Daventry grew up such another as his mother? If he cared nothing for right, but everything for possession, what then?

"I will still leave it," answered Lord Daventry aloud, "and wherever I am, I shall see and know if sin escapes its consequences."

Then he sat suddenly erect and his face changed terribly, for a woman's skirt swished softly over the grass outside, and coming towards the long French window was Lady Daventry.

She came in quickly, shutting the window to behind her, and went towards her husband with a fond smile. Then she gave a cry of fear and rushed to the bell.

"You are ill, dearest?" She flew towards him, anguish in her eyes. There was death on his face, and he was all she had ever loved. That hour had its bitterness for her.

He rose from the table and staggered towards her. He could not hear what she said, he could not even see her plainly; he was growing past seeing or hearing. He only saw two things: a mouth that gaped out of the darkness, and the flash of a dagger so small that the woman of Damascus had carried it in her garter. He had it in his hand now.

His right hand fastened on the dagger, but the fingers of his left clawed the air, as he sought for breath to utter just one appalling term. But though he mouthed terribly

and his face was horrible to look upon, his tongue could not form even one coherent word. He rocked on his feet, and Lady Daventry strove to uphold him, while something dark and awful enveloped them both.

His face grew black and swollen, and still his fingers, clawing with terrible fury, sought that mocking mouth. He thought he slashed at it with the dagger, but he was tearing down her hair instead with his left hand, so that it wound round them as they strove together.

He fell, dragging her with him, and as she lay unconscious with her head against the iron fender, he struck again and again at the face he saw through a blood-red mist, and this time it was the dagger hand he used, lacerating it in a ghastly fashion, mutilating the beauty that had led to his undoing.

Then with one convulsive movement he lay still, and his face was hidden in the glory of the woman's hair, its silken softness against his lips.

The butler coming in answer to the ring, found them so, and the doctor was sent for, but could not save the life of the man, or the beauty of the woman.

Lady Daventry, weeping softly over her dead husband, was glad that he could not see her in her ruined beauty, or know that he, all unwitting, had done this thing. She would have given more than her beauty for his life; if she had not already sold her soul she would have bartered that very gladly.

That, in his death agony, he should have hurt the thing he most loved, have desecrated the beauty he idolised, would always be a terrible thing, but it was a knowledge that death had spared him.

Lady Daventry had her tall, stately figure left, her graceful carriage, her distinction, her wonderful, red-gold hair, and the blue of her eyes; but she had nothing else. Her lacerated face could never be seemly to look upon again, it must always be rather fearful. It was a grief to her, but not the grief it would have been to many. It had brought her all she craved before she lost it. If no longer beautiful, she was still young, still brilliant; she was Lady Daventry, rich and powerful, and omnipotent in her little world. For twenty-one years the reins were absolutely hers; they would be as absolutely hers at the end of

one-and-twenty years. She meant to be very sure of that. As babe, boy, and man, Philip should always be the pawn. She had lived at Daventry the years that counted, she would die there, the only Lady Daventry that counted still.

She could plan, and grieve in the same breath, for few husbands are more lamented than was Lord Daventry by his young widow. She missed his affection and companionship every day of her life, and she missed them no less as the years went on. Only one friend had ever come into her life, and now he had passed out of it.

She could be great still, but she must always be lonely.

If she might have known what he had striven so hard to say to her in those awful, dying moments! If she might have learned his last message, had one last fond word to remember! Had he tried to call her darling for the last time? She would never know now; she must always wonder.

Before Lord Daventry was buried, a letter reached her from Bruce's London doctor, saying that he thought it better to warn her that he feared Mr. Daventry was dangerously, even fatally, ill.

Lord Daventry was lying dead upstairs, but that made no difference to the letter she dictated to her secretary. The London doctor was informed that the late Lord Daventry had been compelled to dismiss his nephew from his employment, and that his widow could not go against the wishes of her beloved husband, and take any notice of the young man or his misfortunes. In the event, however, of a fatal termination, a telegram must at once be sent to Daventry, and Lord Daventry's executors would make all necessary arrangements.

She waited with eager impatience for the telegram that would tell her the man she hated was removed for ever from her path. She had nothing to fear now, but with her victim dead there would be even less to disturb her. After all, dead men tell no tales, have perhaps no tales to tell.

Therefore to know him lying in the family vault would have been the greatest satisfaction to her. It was bitter to think how death had taken the beloved and left the hated. If her wishes could have slain, then Bruce would

146 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

never have recovered from that illness, but he came back from the borders of death to fulfil his destiny.

Meanwhile Lady Daventry went on her way with all, save her face, unchanged. She was very successful, very contented, if lonely often, very sure that all was right with her world, and entirely unaware that over her head hung suspended the sword.

CHAPTER XIX

TAKING UP THE BURDEN

"Everyone thinks his own burden the heaviest."—*French Proverb.*

LORD DAVENTRY had been in his grave many weeks, when the wreck of his nephew crawled down Fleet Street. It seemed to Bruce as he crept painfully along, that he must have been mad to see any glamour in Fleet Street, that it was grey and hopeless, as grey and hopeless as life. This time he was not blind to the wrecks success had flung aside with a laugh; he took his own place in the army of failures. The editor of *The Old Brigade* was right. The thing he envied was not his, never would be his: he had even ceased to desire it very keenly, as he had ceased to desire anything in life. It seemed too much trouble to have ambitions now. He had risen from a death-bed, but he had not come back to life. He was not really alive, but numb with the impress of death; the living world showed as a mirage, and only the dead world as a reality. In fact both mental and physical powers were at their lowest ebb.

"Why couldn't I die, why didn't I die?" he demanded ungratefully of Fate. "What's the good of it all?"

He was speaking aloud, though he did not know it, and the question was flung at a woman with whom he was on the point of colliding.

"Why, it's Mr. Daventry!" And the large, alert-looking woman held out a large hand. She could not altogether hide her sense of shock at the changed face of the man before her.

Bruce Daventry, thin, stooping, grey-haired, with white, hopeless face and haunted eyes, at six-and-twenty! Bruce Daventry hugging despair because his uncle had flung him from his doors in disgrace!

148 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"Surely you've been ill!" she exclaimed.

He nodded, and smiled rather feebly. "Just up, Miss Lister," he said, envying her her health and strength, and air of content. "What a rotten old show it is to be sure! But you look satisfied enough; you're in the ranks of the successes, I hear—novelist, editress?"

The big woman looked into his eyes and was shocked at what she saw. Here was man on the brink of despair, a human being at the last ditch! She was a very busy woman, but she was kind and sympathetic, when she had the time. She had not the time on this occasion, but she made it. The handsome, intellectual boy, he had seemed a boy then, and she was twelve years his senior, had always appealed to her. He had always treated her with kindly courtesy and interest when she came to her brother's vicarage, and she had been but the struggling middle-class, unattractive novelette-writer, and he heir to a great name, and a great heritage.

Now the positions were reversed, she as a successful wage-earner, he as one who could earn little or nothing, stood in an entirely new relationship. Perhaps he had been sorry for her because she was slaving her youth away, now she was sorry for him, for she saw youth and hope dead at twenty-six.

There must, then, be something after all in the late Lord Daventry's accusation that his nephew had cheated him, and been justly turned away a beggar. She had, in company with many, declined to believe it, but now she asked herself if anything short of remorse and guilt could trace such lines on a young face.

Unlike her reverend brother, she could pity and sympathise with the sinner, and understood temptation in most of its forms. She was a good woman, an orderly, and, in a sense, a convention-loving one, but she was no hard, austere bigot. Whatever Bruce had done, she had but to look in his face to realise he had paid to the full.

"Success!" She sighed a little. "Well, I suppose so! I make a good income, I am popular among shop-girls and that ilk who look forward weekly to *Every Girl's Sweet-heart*. It's the best of its kind, pretty and simple, and entirely on the side of the angels, but it is not exactly literature or fame, you know. Still I had this, and I hadn't

the other, and this boils the pot quicker! I have kept within my ken. I don't hitch my wagon to a star, and I hope you won't either, Mr. Daventry. A mule is more useful, you know."

"I haven't a wagon to hitch," he returned rather hopelessly.

"Oh, but you have! All the world has that! If you have forgotten our old talks, your old ambitions, I haven't!"

"Oh, that was in another world, another life."

"My dear boy," she paused, for "boy" was an inappropriate term for this man who looked older than herself, "you've just recovered, if you call it recovery, from a serious illness. Naturally you take the jaundiced view. I was just going into my club, which is close here through the Temple, for a quiet cup of tea," she had not been going near her club, as a matter of fact, "and it would be a kindness if you would come too, and have a chat. You have seen the twins much later than I. Is it true they really mother poor Jenny's orphan?"

Bruce went unresistingly. The drawing-room was deserted, and they sat together over the fireplace at the one end, and had tea. During their hour's talk, Miss Lister learned everything she wanted to know. The unhappy young man had been justly dismissed, he owned it frankly, and also, with the exception of some fifty pounds and several cases of books, some of them valuable, he was without a penny in the world, and had no expectations of any sort.

"I must sink or swim on my own account," he said drearily, warming his thin, drawn hands over the fire. "Of course it will be sinking, but I shan't be much loss. The sooner some of us go under and out of sight, the better!"

"If you want me to show I am no lady and to strike a gentleman," gibed Miss Lister, "say that again! 'Money lost, much lost; honour lost, more lost; hope lost, all lost.' That mayn't be quoted quite correctly, but it's near enough, and plain enough too. Be a man, Bruce Daventry! Your 'fortune' will be enough with care. It is at least about five times the amount I had when I blithely appeared to take London by storm, more years ago than I care to count."

"You could write; I can't. I can only want to, and can

150 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

just write enough to make any other occupation impossible."

"You can't hope to succeed at once. Of course you have been brought up luxuriously, with the expectation of more luxury to come, and at any time a woman can live on less when it comes to a pinch. And of course it came to it," she went on in a matter-of-fact tone. "If I had known then what I know now . . . But never mind that! At least no girl relative of mine shall ever face it if I can prevent her. True, I'm editress and serialist of note," she made a wry face, "and the grey wolf has departed in the sulks. He seeks his victims among the talented and genius-born."

"Then perhaps he will leave me alone," said Bruce bitterly. "I was reading some of my own stuff over this morning, and I saw it for what it was at last. Do you think I have enough talent to please your shop-girls?"

"Can you be interesting and dramatic? Can you weave love scenes ad lib?"

"Love!" His face darkened. "No," he said harshly, "I am no good at all. I can't write fiction; I make even facts duller and heavier than they are. Some of my essays got accepted. I suppose I must keep on trying. There are people who would gladly see me sinking, be very ready to say 'I told you so!' For that reason alone I must struggle on. I might improve, and it's the only thing I care about."

"I have read your articles," answered Miss Lister, "and it seemed to me that what they lacked was the up-to-date touch, they are too learned, too ponderous. People want something 'catchy' and quickly read these days. Will you consider a suggestion of mine?"

"I shall only be too grateful for any suggestion."

"You have your fifty pounds and your books as capital. I know two young men on papers who want a third to take a sixty pounds flat with them, that would be twenty pounds a year for rent. There's a bedroom each, a kitchen, bathroom, and quite a decent sitting-room. Each of them have a little furniture they've picked up with my help. I know lots of the best second-hand places. You would have to furnish your own bedroom. You could manage like this for a year or longer if your books are really valuable. Try and manage as long as possible,

Mr. Daventry, and in the meanwhile write hard, and try hard, so that when the day comes that you have to sell your last book, you will be on the road to self-support."

Bruce's face brightened. "I shall be only too glad. But will they have me?" His voice was full of wistful humility.

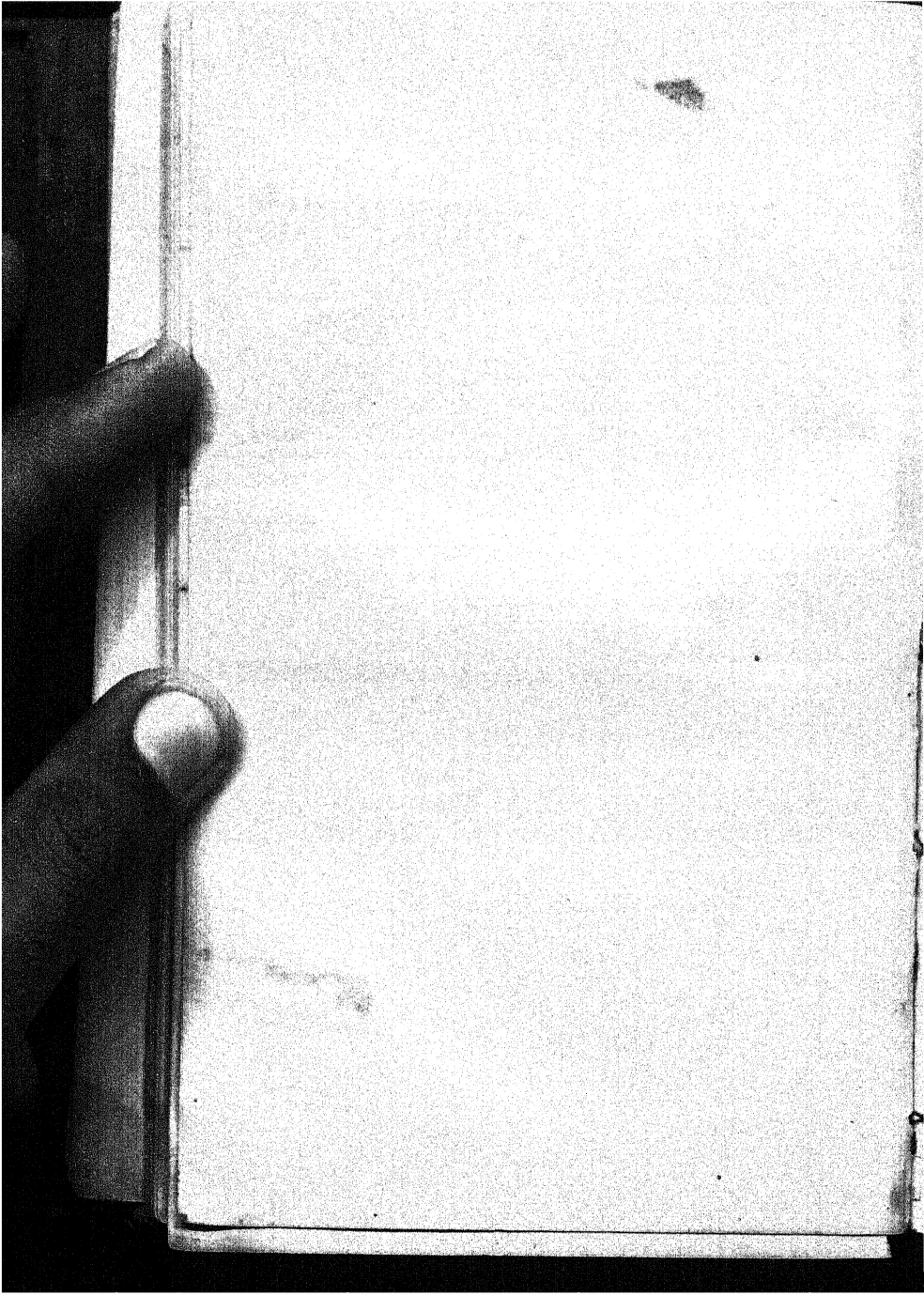
"Oh, they'll have you." She spoke briskly. "Will you let me help you to pick up anything you need? I love that sort of thing, and few men can shop cheaply."

"You have shown me how to save myself," he returned huskily. "I can't attempt to thank you."

A few weeks later Bruce and his companions were in their flat, all working very hard, and thankful to be done with landladies. The flat itself looked very cosy to them after what they had endured in cheap lodgings. A restaurant attached made the meal-problem a simple one. The neighbourhood was poor, almost sordid, but they did not concern themselves overmuch with that, and the tube took them quickly out of it.

Here for two years Bruce worked unceasingly, living sparsely on the residue of his fifty pounds and his books. By degrees he got to be known among editors as a writer without much talent, and of no brilliance whatever, but who could always be depended upon for a well-thought-out article delivered on time. He filled up gaps. He could write learnedly on several subjects, and was well up in the classics. Consequently a place was found, now and then, for Bruce Daventry, and the man himself was both liked and respected.

At the end of two years he was earning a small, a very small wage, as a hack-writer, and had also got some translations and research work. He was able to keep many of his treasured volumes, and on the whole, though flavourless and bitter with the memory of sin, his life was not unhappy. He knew some pleasant people, and his own work improved a little, though it never became really good. Still, it was in its way useful, and that is always something, and he had won to a niche of sorts.



BOOK II

MARGARET LISTER. THE STRUGGLE

"And Nature, the old nurse, took
The child upon her knee,
Saying : ' Here is a story book
The Father has written for thee.'

' Come wander with me,' she said,
' Into regions yet untrod ;
And read what is still unread
In the manuscripts of God.'

And he wandered away and away
With Nature, the dear old nurse,
Who sang to him night and day
The rhymes of the universe.

And whenever the way seemed long,
Or his heart began to fail,
She would sing a more wonderful song,
Or tell a more marvellous tale."

LONGFELLOW.



CHAPTER XX

THE TWO WORLDS

"If you go shod with dreams
Your feet shall be
On paths as soft as sleep
Where dreams are free.
These are the ways of the World;
Dear Heart, take heed,
If you go shod with dreams
Your feet shall bleed."

PATRICIA WENTWORTH.

THOUGH to outward seeming Margaret Lister walked in the same world as her brothers and sisters, it was to outward seeming only, and like Thoreau, she did not always keep step with her companions because she heard a different drummer. The gates that were closed to them flung down their bars for her, and she walked in a world of dreams, of siren voices, where the streams of imagination flowed down the great purple mountains of hope. Daily she entered this world, when she could not endure the other, and daily she found something fresh, some new throbbing beauty. Most of her childhood's hours were spent within it: it was so much more real than the other. She was usually dragged rather rudely from its portals by a smack for "not attending."

Her crude, sallow little face with its odd magnetic eyes had few admirers; her own people thought her as plain as she was tiresome.

"Really she might be a changeling!" the second Mrs. Lister exclaimed. Unconsciously she stated a fact, since nothing of gentle, submissive mother, or selfish father, went to Meg's making.

Yet more good fairies than was usual had appeared at her christening, and many were the gracious gifts bestowed, humour, courage, virility, all to stand right gallantly by her

in the days to come. Of course the bad fairy had to come and spoil everything. She laughed as she scattered her gifts, specially as she bestowed the last. "None of you shall save this child," she said maliciously, "for I have given her genius, and she must go through life in pursuit of a star. Sorrow shall be her portion by day, by reason of it, and heaviness by night, and from her the sun shall veil his face . . ."

Then the good fairies pressed yet closer to the unconscious babe, shut out that grim presence, and poured yet richer gifts into the infant lap, so that Meg went endowed beyond the usual lot of women.

To her step-mother she was a violent personality pervading the vicarage: she did not see the baby feet stumbling forward blindly to fulfil a great destiny. She knew nothing of the Car of Fate that came hurtling ruthlessly down the vista, and caught up Margaret, bearing her madly along; knew nothing of the god in the car driving ever more furiously, looking down at Margaret's strange smile.

"We're off!" he said.

Margaret caught her breath. She knew there was no return for her. "So it seems," she returned.

"There's something wrong with that child," said Mrs. Lister angrily to her husband; "wrong in her head, I mean."

Mr. Lister at once gave a weary recital of his own sound stock, and laid the pedigree of his first wife on the table, so to speak. He said his children could never have anything wrong in their heads. None the less, when, a little later, he came upon Margaret wandering round the garden in one of her "moods," he seized her by the arm and shook her violently. "What are you listening to?" he demanded. For even Mr. Lister recognised the child was listening to something.

"I don't know," she returned in a dazed fashion.

And she did not know, not then at any rate. Jeanne D'Arc recognised the voices that came to her for what they were, but Margaret could only feel the high, clear voice she heard calling. She could not understand, and least of all could she explain, that her ears were attuned to other sounds, her eyes to longer visions.

Across the thunder of the world, a louder thunder : amidst a multitude of voices, that one clear call : across the wide, dead silences, a silence greater still !

As a voice crying in the night, to one a still small voice, to another the clarion call, to both a force that may not be denied. "Take up thy cross and follow me ! Perchance at the end there lies the crown !"

And so, poor fools of fate, they follow, not because they will, but because they must, and because the song of the Pied Piper shrills fiercely, and for ever, in their ears ; weary, stumbling, falling, and at last out of all the multitude there is one that reaches the end, and crowns himself—with thorns ! For the rest, the Moloch has claimed youth, and love and happiness, for he has never let his victims forget, "thou shalt have none other gods but me."

A crown, with never a rose : a sceptre, which is a sword : a palace, full of the dead, and not of the living. These are the price of victory. And yet in spite of all, and because of all, it remains a victory worth while.

So with her father's rough grasp upon her arm, the child still stood with her eyes far away, and a listening look upon her intent little face, while the north wind flung her hair into wild, dark strands.

Again and again it came, born on the wind, rising, falling, insistent, the clarion call ! And as Meg turned her ugly little face towards it, the sound swelled into a great song, and lo ! the piper "piped the song of the morrow, and it was long as years," and to its sound there stepped the feet of the living and of the dead, "a viewless host marching to noiseless drums."

"Meg ! How dare you not answer when I speak to you ?"

She took not the least notice. It seemed to her that the strange, wild music was coming nearer, that something, somebody, was speaking to her, saying words she could not understand : words of a writer she had not yet read :

"For the gift comes that will make you bare, and the man comes that will bring you care."

Something was driving that wonderful voice away, something was shaking her, striking her.

She turned and saw her father. "Oh, you !" she said, and the small grim mouth curled.

"You stupid child! You obstinate little mule! I'll teach you to refuse to answer!" She was hauled into the study and chastised with that manly vigour upon which Mr. Lister prided himself. "People can't say the Church is an effeminate institution as long as such men as I belong to it!" he said, contemplating, with approval, his six feet of coarse manhood.

The child of nine drew her black brows together, and fighting down the rising pain, looked this muscular Christian up and down. "You won't strike me much longer," she said, and there was a whole world's fury in her blazing eyes. "Lord Daventry has saved us from you."

For Lord Daventry had made provision in his will that the twins should be sent to a certain first-class boarding-school when they reached ten years of age, and educated there till their eighteenth birthday. On leaving they were to receive a hundred pounds to do with whatsoever they liked. For the orphan a like provision had been made, but, because, as Meg said quaintly, "orphans always seemed to cost more," he was to go to Oxford after school, and to receive his hundred pounds when he came down at twenty-two. During these years, suitable clothes, allowances, and all expenses were to be provided, but not a penny of the money was to pass through the hands of Mr. and Mrs. Lister. It was a bequest that astonished many, and very much annoyed Lady Daventry. Even Mr. and Mrs. Lister were not very pleased. "I ask you," said husband to wife, "what—what the—ahem, dickens, are we to get out of it?"

"Why just those three? Why not my children too?" demanded the wife. "A school like that, and Oxford, and for an orphan! Giving them such ideas!"

"They will be educated as my dear wife would have wished," said Mr. Lister pompously, "and as is fitting for her children and mine. Of course the orphan can take a curacy afterwards." It never occurred to him that of all people, the orphan was most unsuited to take holy orders, or that he would decline. But the orphan declined in language that will not bear repeating. "Me a devil-dodger-blighter," was one of the politest, "not much! You can search me!"

"Meg isn't mad, merely bad," growled Mr. Lister, you

must bring her up better. It's absurd, there's no discipline anywhere."

Certainly to see Margaret, sticky with illicit jam, instructing the docile Dosé and the ever-ready orphan in the way they should not go, was to think not of genius in the making, but of a stubborn little savage in sad need of correction.

Even her playfellows grew exasperated at times. Why cry over a dying bird, why be miserable for an hour over a little life of a moment?

"Come on, it's dead now t'any rate," said the orphan roughly.

Meg came on, but all the time she was thinking of a desolate mate, a starving brood, for it was the breeding season. She saw them watching and watching, their yellow beaks very wide; she felt their hungry indignation when the watched-for parent did not come. She saw the panic in the other bird's eyes. She dare not trust herself to speak. She was thinking of those tragedies which are so common, so small, and yet so terrible.

What of the maimed birds of the world? For what end had they been created? As an example of courage, an object of pity? What of the broken wings? For all but them the blue of heaven. They are never to get very close to it, never to look their fill; for them it is always "from him that hath not shall be taken away." "Hope on, fight on," is their noble creed, so that at the last it is the failure who stands high, and not those other triumphant ones.

Always a struggle, and often a tragedy, and yet somehow, some day, they get near their sun, and for a moment are bathed in its golden ecstasy. In that moment the broken wing is stilled of agony, and even if the heart is too sick and weary to sing its song of triumph, yet the ears are not too deaf to hear the "well done" of just one, human or divine, who has understood.

Only a moment out of life, yet what a moment! Only the distant savour of success, for the strong unmaimed have passed the tired struggler, and high above his head thrills the joyous song of victory, the song he may never hope to sing himself.

The rather awful gift of Margaret Lister made such

tragedies pass clearly and often before her eyes, kept her from happiness at such times, because she was compelled to look upon the worse than dead, and to take her share of a world's agony, so that often for her a sense of tragedy darkened the light of the sun. She was always suffering vicariously for someone or something.

But if there was sorrow and things ill to dwell on that the bad fairy had bestowed upon her, there were the gifts of the others, and at times a light would shine such as never was on land and sea, and laughter, and dancing feet and dancing eyes, kept her company. No one could laugh as heartily as Margaret; no one ever had a keener, more helpful sense of humour. She could and did laugh at herself, and her own weaknesses did not escape.

Her childhood seemed strangely long, and yet all too short, and the scenes that she remembered best were not necessarily the most important.

For instance, flashing through a confused patchwork, was "the old lord," the coming of "the new lady." There was handsome young Ffiffe whom she loved in the way of a fanciful, passionate, precocious child. There was the curious exit of Bruce Daventry and the blank he left behind. The death of "the old lord," the ugliness of the once fair "new lady," and the appearance of the auburn-haired baby lord. There were marriages among her own family, goings out into the world, comings back, once under a cloud. The short exciting visits of prodigal Aunt Luce were not to be excepted, for at such times there came a reign of plenty as far as the twins were concerned. There were a dozen other things, great and small, the most trifling longest remembered. And so the pageant passed, and childhood passed with it.

CHAPTER XXI

ADAM'S WORLD IN RUINS

"Chaos has come again."—*Othello*.

THE lovely Lulu, Mrs. Coneybeare-Ffiffe, had formed one of a rather rowdy house-party in the neighbourhood of Daventry Castle, and her big school-boy son, as admiring and adoring as ever, broke his journey from school with the intention of accompanying her home.

The groom was left to come to the station with the luggage, and Adam was as proud as any young lover of the fair, smiling woman beside him. How different from the mothers of the other fellows!

"You grow younger and lovelier each time I come home," he said contentedly. "By the time I am middle-aged you'll be taken for my daughter!"

Mrs. Ffiffe echoed his laughter, gazing at him oddly out of the corners of her strange green eyes. "That's a long time ahead," she exclaimed, and added, with a pretty little shudder, "thank goodness!" Then she looked at her big, stalwart son again, at his handsome face, keen, cool eyes, and dominant chin. "I wonder—" she began, and paused abruptly.

He touched up the horse. "What do you wonder, materkin?"

"Oh, I shall never tell you!"

"Then you shan't have a penny! Oh, hang it, here's a kid in a pram, and right in the middle of the road, of course! I say, what a swell turn-out!"

"It'll be little Daventry," said Mrs. Ffiffe, interested. "Do stop, dear, I have always wanted to see him!"

"I hate kids," returned Adam, almost roughly, "and you know you don't like them either."

"I don't like this one, certainly," laughed Lulu, "for he does away with any chance you might have had, but I'm curious to see him. Do stop, that's a darling! Just to please me!"

Adam stopped, and his mother got out of the dogcart, and approached the little cavalcade, introducing herself with a merry laugh.

The nurse was only too ready to show her charge to this fascinating beauty.

"Adam, come here and look at your kinsman," commanded his mother. "As the head of our house he is not to be ignored even now."

Adam did not move. "I don't like babies," he said shortly.

Lulu pouted, turning her limpid eyes on her son. "How can you be so unkind, and when I ask you specially?"

Adam came at that, and bent a set face over the child staring curiously up at him with Bruce's eyes. His face hardened, and he made no comment.

His mother watched him in amazement. So this son of hers was capable of envy, hatred, and malice, for all his "bigness"! He disliked the interloper who cut off any hope of Daventry, that goodly heritage.

"What lovely auburn hair!" she said. "So he's one of the red Daventrys, like Bruce."

Adam threw another glance at the infant, and then drew back as if from something monstrous and unclean. He took hold of his mother's arm, and put her masterfully in the cart, then without one backward glance he drove down the wide old road, only anxious to leave behind an image that revolted.

"Do you ever hear anything of your old friend, Bruce, now?" asked Lulu idly.

Adam winced, and the old wound throbbed madly for a moment. "I know nothing of him," he answered briefly. "I heard he's somewhere round Fleet Street, writin' and that."

"You used to be such friends." She stared at him fixedly. Adam was such a staunch friend.

"We are friends no longer," returned the lad through clenched teeth, and his mother wondered afresh, and yet found no courage to question that set young face. Adam

worshipped her in his blind, boyish way, but he did not take her into his confidence.

Mr. Ffiffe met them in his nerveless, guilty fashion, kissed his wife's indifferent lips, and jerked out a few questions on school matters to his son. Then he turned into the house, and asked himself wearily the everlasting question, "How much longer?" Every hour of his life he lived in dreaded anticipation of the crash: it would almost be a relief when the blow came, and one part of the long agony ended.

He had not very long to wait.

A notorious divorce case came up for hearing, and created a great sensation. There was much washing of dirty linen in public, and a shocked public saying "How disgusting!" and buying those papers which gave the worst details. Lulu Ffiffe was involved in it, and that special linen proved the worst. Everything became public property; the career and past life of the bearer of an honourable English name, in particular. She was found to be one with Lulu, the notorious Paris dancer and demi-mondaine, daughter and grand-daughter of demi-mondaines, and that revelation created more than a nine days' sensation.

The past came out of its grave as it has a way of doing on such occasions, incident after incident appeared; and they were all of them unpleasant. Lulu was seen for what she was, her career blazoned abroad. The name of some of her "protectors" in that former life were given or hinted at; one of them was a dark-skinned prince whose jewels she still wore. And this was the woman they had all received in their houses, and whose emeralds, the envy of many of her hostesses, were supposed to be heirlooms! No wonder Society was shocked.

Then came the turn of the unhappy husband. He was shown a careless pleasure-seeker in a gay city, spending his fortune on the lovely Lulu. His mad passion for her, and the incredible marriage that followed, was told. He had married her under her real name, a name never associated with her during any part of her career, and had brought her to his English country home as the orphan daughter of an old French friend. Of course a resemblance between her and the notorious dancer had often been seen, but Lulu was very clever, and she did not let it go beyond a

resemblance to those from whom she sought to hide the past. She dressed differently, did her hair differently, dispensed with the garish make-up she had been in the habit of using, became infinitely more beautiful, and very, very skilful at imitating the type of woman she was supposed to be.

Now and then men from the old life drifted across her path, and were not always to be deceived, but they had been glad enough to keep the secret : to them she was Lulu still, and always would be, since the terrible thing was in her blood.

Her mad extravagances in London and elsewhere were recounted : she had spent her husband's fortune with incredible rapidity, and many others since.

The quiet country neighbours had accepted the "ways of the Frenchwoman" philosophically enough, and what they would not have tolerated in an Englishwoman they put down to "foreign training," often saying what odd places French convents must be, and that no daughter of theirs should be educated in such a fashion. Lulu made her conquest of the women first, throwing dust into their eyes very cleverly. Of course men hung round her rather obviously, but then she was so smart, so merry, so lovely, it was scarcely to be wondered at, and her devoted husband did not seem to mind.

However, when the crash came, people said they had guessed the truth all along, and recounted certain incidents which showed only too plainly how matters stood.

Naturally the press, selling edition after edition, on the strength of the most notorious scandal of the day, did not spare the Frenchwoman or her husband. Why should they? They were persons quite beyond the pale, and it was an obvious duty to tell the truth about them. They had no need either, to tell more than the truth.

Vile as was the woman, the man turned out to be worse. That he should have married such a woman with his eyes open showed exactly of what stuff he was made. That he should have introduced his friends to her, encouraged their visits! Things pointed to this, and worse. The woman was bad, but the man was more infamous still. He had lived on the liberality of his wife's lovers.

Then Adam was mentioned, and it was said that this son

of an infamous couple might, under certain circumstances, have one day become Lord Daventry, and what a mercy it was that now such a possibility was removed.

Adam read these, and other things.

The unhappy boy had matured early, and, if an idealist, was no fool. He knew of evil though he preferred to shut his eyes to it, but he had not known there were such horrors as this in the world. He could not shut his eyes to his own disgrace. He understood all that was written plainly, and he understood every veiled reference to the unspeakable and the unprintable. He saw his parents for what they were, and himself as bone, and flesh, and blood, of those parents.

He remembered that it was his mother who paid his school-fees, who gave him his allowance, his hunters and so on. He was filled with a shame so corroding that he thought of taking his own life. The thing changed him utterly, and for ever. The bright, merry boy became the bitter, gloomy man, with a hatred and distrust, amounting to horror, of all womenkind. It did not kill him, though he thought it was going to, and hoped it would, but it killed the happiest and best in him, and sent him out into the world a pessimist and an outcast.

He was back at Eton when it happened, the centre of a throng of staring school-boys, most of whom were horribly sorry, but did not know how to show it, and one day, when the name "Adam Coneysbeare-Ffiffe" (there was a Seton-Ffiffe, a distant cousin, there at the same time) was read out, there came no reply, and Adam was missing.

He was never to answer to that name again as long as he lived.

His hat was found in the river, and, though his body could not be discovered, it was generally supposed he had committed suicide. At any rate he disappeared completely.

His parents in those places where the outclassed hold revelry together, whence they had fled to hide their shame, or to laugh at it with those who knew not the meaning of the word, heard of the supposed end of Adam. The woman cursed the day that her recklessness had led to discovery, and, mad with remorse, plunged deeper into the depths. Her husband, clinging to her in spite of all, with an insensate passion which made him a laughing-stock, received the

166 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

news without a word, but he thanked God that the son he had loved was dead.

The story was discussed in every house and cottage in the country, and Meg understood vaguely that, because Adam's parents had turned out to be somehow "dreadful," Adam was "dreadful" too. The fact did not destroy Meg's affection, rather otherwise. Then came the tale of his suicide, and Meg, for many a day, could not look upon the river without a vision of the dead boy she loved caught in its eddies, though all the time she could not feel that he was really dead.

She cried herself to sleep at nights, and in her dreams an awful drowned face giped at her. She knew what a drowned face looked like because she had seen a fisherman recovered from the sea after many days.

It was months, even years, before memory, and that terrible face, faded. When she grew old enough to understand the cruel story, the fate of the boy who had loved life and honour, and rejoiced so proudly in his youth and strength, seemed a very pitiable one to her, and one she hated to think upon. The death of Adam left some strange blank in her childish, passionate heart. She could not marry him now when she grew up as she had always determined: she would indeed not marry anybody. She'd be an "independent lady" like Aunt Luce. But she wept at the thought.

There was a strong vein of passion and romance in Margaret: she was not meant for the solitary way, though it might be, for the sake of her art, she would choose it.

Throughout all the vistas of childhood went the figure of him she so aptly called "the lonely little lord."

For Philip Daventry there was everything wealth and rank could give, but no love, no companionship, no childish happiness.

There was a tiny baby-girl, orphan-heiress of the next estate with whom he was encouraged to play, for Lady Daventry meant these two, blessed of fortune, to marry and increase their wealth, but they were too much alike, their circumstances too much alike, for them to interest each other. Neither had learned to play.

Philip would have given all his future to have hopped out of his carriage and made mud pies with the village

children, and perhaps the little Baroness would have given hers!

They might as well have asked for the moon!

Careful guardians hedged them about on every side. The disreputable, but enviable vicarage children were beyond the pale, and perhaps fortunately so. They would have taught nothing to their juniors it was desirable they should know, save perhaps some joy in living.

So little Philip's great, wistful, red-brown eyes would grow more wistful as he drove in state past the twins and the orphan playing by the roadside, or trying to drown themselves in the river, and they would envy him his lovely carriage and house and multitude of toys, and neither ever guessed the truth about the other.

Then, one day, as the exquisitely dressed little fellow with the shining, auburn curls was walking through the woods with his nursery governess, he came suddenly upon Meg, who of course had no right there at all, swinging from the branch of a tree, and there was such longing, such pathos, in his eyes, that suddenly the girl darted at him, called Dosé to take his other hand, and, with the orphan scampering behind, fled into a safe hiding-place known to them alone, and gave the little Lord Daventry a lesson in how to play.

If it was a dirty and torn peer of the realm they brought back to his distracted governess, it was a very happy one.

She was frightened, and did not know what course to take. Like all her dependents, the girl was terrified of Lady Daventry, who had no mercy on lapses or disobedience. The poor girl, who had neither home nor money, would, she knew, be instantly dismissed, and in disgrace. The post and pay were both very good.

She gazed piteously at the children who had ruined her.

Meg seemed to read her thoughts. "It's all right," she said easily, "take him in by the back and wash and change him. Nobody need be any the wiser."

Miss Horsley said she must tell Lady Daventry at once, but of course she followed Meg's suggestion, and henceforth found herself compelled to act in collusion with that determined young person, who had taken Philip under her wing. The boy never had any eyes for lovely Dosé, for him Meg with her dominant face and great, wild eyes

represented the universe, and he was only happy in her company. His weaker, sweeter, more gentle nature clung to hers as the ivy to the oak; she was his goddess, the sun in his heaven, the one human being who had stooped to relieve his solitude, and to bring him golden hours.

Meg gave him a careless protecting affection, and to her he remained merely "the lonely little lord."

CHAPTER XXII

CASTLES IN SPAIN

"You never know your luck."—*Proverb.*

AT an early age Dosé started collecting admirers, as her companions collected stamps and autographs. Her court was more notable for its quantity of adherents than for its quality, and the more fastidious Margaret, who neither sought nor obtained such notice, took her to task on the matter.

"Have 'em," she said, "it means chocolates and flowers, and heaps of partners at dances; but weed, Dosé, weed! Some of them are really awful, and all of them are callow and silly. What do boys of twenty want to hang round girls for? They ought to be thinking of their games and their work. These boys never think of anything. I suppose they haven't the apparatus."

Dosé dimpled. "They think of me," she said; unashamed, "and sometimes they propose. It's rather fun."

Meg was contemptuous. "Of course boys of that age have got to propose to something or somebody, if only to get their hand in by the time they grow up. Was that what Tommy Henley was doing yesterday? It seemed to make his eyes rather red."

Dosé's soft heart was touched. "Poor Tommy, he can't live without me, and of course he'll have to. And he hasn't any money, and if he had, I wouldn't marry a boy. I want to marry someone like King Arthur, or Sir Galahad." Her eyes began to shine. "Who will you marry, Meg?"

Meg grinned. "Who I can get," she returned, "in other words nobody, which doesn't matter, as marryin' is the last thing I have got in my mind. As for King Arthurs and Sir Galahads, they've gone out long ago. You must marry someone nice, and with lots of money. For heaven's sake

don't fall in love with a poor man like the rest of them, and spend your life dragging up piles of kids, and nagging at the husband because you are tired out!"

"Babies are rather jolly," sighed Dosé, "though of course it would be beastly to be poor, and I shall take care not to do anything like that. Only I don't know anybody rich."

"There's that new curate," said Meg, "he really is a good sort, no one would ever suppose he belonged to the church. He will come in for tons, and they say he is sure to be made a bishop."

"I couldn't respect a man who wore an apron and had fat, bulgy legs which he was always showing. I don't think it seems quite nice somehow——"

"But Mr. Dalton is a big, fine man, his legs don't bulge——"

"They would when he became a bishop," insisted Dosé gloomily, "and if they didn't bulge they'd do something wrong, be skinny or horrid, and he'd be 'my lord' and I should just be Mrs. Dalton, and have to have clergymen's wives crawling about the place half the time. I tell you I couldn't bear it, or respect a man like that, and I will love and respect my husband."

"You are so exacting," shrugged Meg, "just look at the specimens that expect you to do both!"

"Oh, I mean one that didn't expect it, but who's wife would have to!" returned Dosé.

"I know you expect everybody to be an angel," returned Meg, "personally I am content if they are just decent. You'd have no mercy on a sinner if you married him."

"I couldn't like a sinner——" began Dosé.

"But if you married him first and found out he was a sinner afterwards?"

"Oh, I would run away," said Dosé instantly, "and never never speak to him again. What would you do? Kill him?" For Meg was always somewhat drastic in her methods.

"I'd probably know what he was before I married him," returned the drastic one, "and take him for better or worse, but I'm not going to marry for years and years, if ever. I'm going to be a great writer."

Dosé was not impressed. She had heard this story before, but she had seen no evidences to support it, for Meg

locked all her scribbles jealously away. They were the only things, of the visible world, she did not share generously with her twin.

"T'any rate I hope mine will have a carriage and pair," exclaimed the pretty husband-hunter fervently.

"Don't have him if he hasn't," advised Meg.

"I certainly shan't!" exclaimed Dosé with emphasis, "what's the good of men without carriages anyway?"

"None," agreed her twin, "but young Phipps is not quite as deady young as the rest, and he's in his father's business, which is awfully rich. He will be able to keep a carriage soon, and I think he means to propose, only he is too shy to hang round you in company, and has to talk to me instead."

A few days later her prophecy was fulfilled. Phipps did propose in stumbling fashion, but, incredible as it seemed, it was to Margaret, and not to Dosé, he offered his hand and heart and prospective carriage, for he mentioned the carriage. Meg thought it was a mistake, and offered to fetch the beauty; but the young man gave her very plainly to understand that she, and she alone, was the object of his passion.

"But why?" gasped Meg. "I'm not pretty."

"No, though your eyes are—are rippin'. I don't know why. Because I can't help it, I suppose."

So Meg looked into that trap called matrimony, and didn't much care for what she saw. She would have to give up all her dreams to be this commonplace youth's wife; true, there would be a carriage, and prospects in a provincial suburb, where she would live and die, and see as little, know as little, of life as her young husband. He was a nice young man in his average sort of way, but Meg was very far from being the average girl who has to say "Yes, thank you," to her first, and very often last chance, or "remain on at home." She had always determined to learn to fly and take a look at the world on her own account.

She declined young Phipps (who soon got over it and proposed to another girl with more sense) the more emphatically that he had stirred the romance and passion of her nature. He did not appeal to her in himself, but he appealed for what he stood for, the knightly figure of young love.

Dosé could not hide her astonishment, and did not seek to. "Of course, I have only my looks, and you have a—a sort of 'way with you' when you like—only you never do like," she added frankly; "you look at them as if they weren't there."

"They aren't—for me."

"How he found the nerve——"

"Oh, never mind the tiresome boy! Next birthday we get our two hundred pounds, and we'll go to Aunt Luce's. I'll write and earn my own living and be famous, and Aunt Luce shall get you a nice rich husband. There must be crowds knocking about in London."

"But will he" (Dosé was alluding fearfully to the Reverend Mr. Lister) "let us keep the money for ourselves?"

"Not if he can help it, but he jolly well won't be able to help it! It was meant for our use."

"We could board with Aunt Luce for a bit. Things would be sure to turn up."

"Husbands for you, editors for me. That will be all right. Only we must lie low at present, not let him guess what we are up to, and save ourselves for the one big struggle."

"But he's starting to be polite already," groaned Dosé; for it was a fact that a sudden unwonted suavity had fallen upon the Reverend Mr. Lister.

"Let him!" scoffed Meg. "He ought to be thankful we are off his hands, and without costing him a penny, too!"

"Would two hundred pounds last us two years if we didn't get them before that?" asked Dosé anxiously. "It sounds a lot, and yet——"

"Of course it would last two years," Meg assured her, "and ages before that time you'll have got a rich husband, and I fame and fortune. We've only to get to London to be in the thick of it and to bring it off. I'm fairly counting the days till our birthday!"

A few days before this notable event, the twins came home from school, most excellently educated, and Mr. Lister took it for granted he was to have the two hundred pounds to pay for their board as long as the money lasted. Whether, when it became exhausted, the twins were to go without board, was not made plain. He had an idea

Dosé would marry quickly, as her sisters had done, and Meg, since she was too ugly to hope for such good fortune, could become a governess. Doubtless he hoped Dosé would marry at once, and Margaret lose no time in obtaining a post; then he would be all to the good; and really he needed some ready money very badly. The ex-lady-help was, as has previously been stated, far from helpful in household ways, and things were in a shocking muddle. Mr. Lister's tastes were not as limited as his means. He liked good food and wines, and to make an impressive figure in smart clothes.

On the eventful day the twins sat warily at the breakfast-table, very conscious of the envelopes by their plates containing their cheques and a few words from the lawyer who had now done with their affairs.

Mr. Lister, his fascinated gaze also going to those envelopes of which he affected unconsciousness, was suave and charming. He even helped his daughters out of his own breakfast-dish, and they found themselves revelling in devilled chicken-legs and bacon. The young wretches enjoyed it no less because the delicate attention left their resolve unshaken. Devilled chicken-leg and bacon was "divine," but even it was not worth quite two hundred pounds. "We won't sell our birthright for a mess of pottage," whispered Meg to her twin, "none of the Esau game for us." And with a brazen smile she asked her father for another helping, and obtained it. For once in his life Mr. Lister had to condescend to eke out at the general dish where the worst of the bacon was cooked anyhow, but looking at the envelopes out of the corners of his eyes, he felt it worth it.

He pounced suddenly, playfully; retrieved the envelopes. "Ha, ha!" he exclaimed. "Is this a dagger I see before me?"

"No, it's our cheques," said Meg, and twitched them neatly out of his finger and thumb as she spoke. "They were addressed to us. Didn't you notice?" She put them in her pocket, swallowed the last mouthful of "devil," and rose from the table. "We're going to look after ourselves now, as Lord Daventry intended. We will join Aunt Luce in London and look round. There are sure to be lots of things that we can do."

She avoided any mention of literature or husbands.

Mr. Lister lost his temper. Had he wasted his breakfast for this? It was an added outrage. He stormed, he tried argument, threats, cajolery, and though Dosé would have capitulated, not so Margaret.

"Understand this," thundered the injured parent, "if you leave the comfortable home I work so hard to provide for you, and sacrifice your own father to your wicked ingratitude and selfishness, I have done with you, and you are no longer daughters of mine! You can sink or swim, the vicarage is your home no longer."

"Very well," said Margaret, "we agree." Dosé was frightened and began to cry.

"I have raised up ungrateful children," quoted Mr. Lister bitterly.

"Then you will be well rid of us," returned Margaret.

Dosé sobbed hard. It seemed dreadful to her to be cast out of house and home, like the sinner in the Bible, as if they had done something wicked. Was it wicked? Was it ungrateful? She would give up her money if Meg would.

But perhaps she knew she was safe; Meg was not numbered among those who "give up."

"Well rid of you, indeed!" echoed the furious Mr. Lister. And well rid of the two hundred pounds, a less pleasant thought! There were things he had ordered which now would have to be countermanded. He waved a hand pulpit-wise: "Go and waste your substance in riotous living. And when you're down to the husks, don't think to come here and sit with folded hands."

Meg suppressed a grin with an effort. How humourless her father was! "I'll promise you that whatever comes or goes, we won't act the prodigal daughters and expect you to fall on our necks and kill the fatted calf as per your favourite sermon." For Mr. Lister preached his most moving sermons on the subject of the return home of the repentant prodigal.

To Mrs. Lister, with her large clamorous brood, this final breaking with the twins was in the nature of a relief. The vicarage was now left to her and her own children; the first family were all thrust out of the nest. The girls were married or in situations, the boys somehow managing for themselves, most of them in the colonies, and Tom

was on the way to riches and success. The orphan did not count, since he too had been provided for up to a certain age by Lord Daventry, and after that age would have to look after himself.

The twins started saying their gay good-byes.

The parting of Meg with Philip Daventry was not, however, very gay. The boy took her departure very badly. He clung to her with desperate tears and kisses, and Meg kissed him back again, and told him to "buck up." He was a mere child of twelve, she considered herself a grown-up woman at eighteen, and from every point of view she could look down on her junior.

"But I'm to have two more years at home with my tutor," wailed Philip, "and it's so lonely! If only my mother would let me go to school, but she won't let me go till after my fourteenth birthday. And you are never coming back here again . . ." he paused, choking.

"Oh no," said Meg, her eyes shining. "I'm going to make a great name, and money."

"How splendid!" he sighed enviously. He had both the great name and the money, and it merely bored him. He could, however, see a certain glamour in fighting for these things.

"Will you write to me sometimes, Meg?" He blushed a little, for his mother scrutinised all his letters. "Write to the woman at the lodge," he added, somehow hating the request. It looked as if he was ashamed of the one friendship he most valued, and it was not that at all. It was that he could not bear profane eyes to glance over his letters, hard profane lips to depreciate Meg.

"I shall be dreadfully busy writing for editors and publishers," she said rather importantly; "but of course I will not forget you, kid, and I daresay I'll find time now and then for a line."

"Oh, please do," he begged piteously. "Oh, Meg, I feel like something all alone in the dark! It's a dreadful feeling. I can't explain!"

She slipped a scraggy arm round his neck. "Look here, you let your mother boss you too much. It doesn't do. Stick up for yourself."

"You don't know mother," he said a little helplessly, "she makes things so difficult, almost impossible. And

then everybody is absolutely under her thumb, and it's been like that always. It'll be different when I come of age and am really master."

Then Lady Daventry came over the fallen leaves towards them, her seamed face and distorted mouth displeased.

"Philip," she cried sharply, "what are you doing here? Come back into the house."

She saw Margaret and knew, of course, who she was, but preferred to affect not to. She had never spoken to the Daventry twins in her life, and she was not going to speak now. She had not forgotten the word Meg had used, and was not likely to forget. She was very angry to find Philip in her company, having had no idea he was on speaking terms with this ugly gawky girl.

But Philip held to Margaret's hand, though his face had coloured. "This is Margaret Lister, mother," he said.

"Indeed," said Lady Daventry, ignoring the introduction. "Come, Philip, I am waiting."

"Good-bye," said Margaret hurriedly; "you had better go."

For a moment an antagonistic glance passed between the two women, and Lady Daventry strove to beat down the defiant eyes. But Meg's eyes encountered hers, and Lady Daventry could do no more than bear her son away.

"How did you come to speak to that girl, or did she speak to you?" she demanded icily. "It was great impertinence. I hear their father has turned them out and they are not returning here. A very good thing. I suppose they will take situations."

Philip was biting his lips hard and incapable of reply.

"When I am grown up," he said defiantly at length, "I shall not live at Daventry, I shall live in London."

"Daventry is no place for an active young man," returned his mother softly. "You must take your place in the world: travel, marry, see everything."

"Yes," said Philip, "that's just what I mean to do."

Lady Daventry felt she had indeed reason to be pleased with the success of her own training. Here was her pawn stating his intention of fulfilling just that part she had mapped out for him.

A few days later the twins, their faces set to the high adventure, took their seats in the London train. No

sooner were their boats burned behind them than gentle, timid Dosé was frightened, and would have given much for safe return to obscurity.

After all, they were rushing into the unknown and anything might happen !

She said as much to Meg, her voice very unsteady.

Meg's pulses were bounding in exultation ; she had no fear, no doubt. She saw a future yielding all they sought. " Why, there are millionaires to-day who started on less than us ! " she exclaimed.

" Yes," agreed Dosé doubtfully, " but not to marry rich husbands and be famous. Oh, Meg, suppose I don't get a rich husband, and you don't get writing to do ? We shall have to come back, and we shall look so silly ! "

" We may have to look silly," returned Meg very grimly, " but we won't come back. We've done with Daventry."

But they hadn't—quite.

They did not tell their aunt she was to expect them. They took her, as they meant to take the world, by storm. They just sailed gaily into the environments of Fleet Street, Dosé in search of a husband, Meg in quest of the big career. They knew their aunt's address, and rattled up to her flat in a cab. They were casual young people.

CHAPTER XXIII

TAKING THE WORLD BY STORM

"Youth is confident."—TUPPER.

"**B**ELLE L'ESTERRE," otherwise Miss Lucy Lister, looked up with a start as the door of her minute sitting-room was flung open, and the twins dashed in, both speaking excitedly at once.

Then her sharp ears caught the sound of boxes being dragged into the tiny passage, and a look of consternation flashed into her round face. "Good Heavens!" she exclaimed. "But you can't! There's no room! This is the smallest flat in the world, though of course awfully convenient."

Her red face deepened in hue. It was no more convenient than her previous flat, and ever so much smaller; but it was cheap, and there usually comes a time to the "Belle L'Esterres" of this world when cheapness is the chief consideration. To be brutal, she had had her day as far as the firm of Fairchild & Co. were concerned. The Fairchilds issued only pure and wholesome fiction of a sentimental and high-moral-toned order, claiming to do good to their reader as well as to their own pockets; but they liked their matter fresh.

"Belle L'Esterre," after some thirty years of writing love scenes, no longer wrote with the same ardour or conviction as of old, was indeed somewhat stale; consequently "Belle L'Esterre" was no longer in very great demand, and growing less so each year.

"It's an indecency to expect a fat spinster of fifty to write love scenes like a sentimental school-girl in love," she complained to Bruce Daventry, "it makes me sick when I try; it never dawned upon me it made the editors sick

too because it did not read very ardently. Fortunately I've got *Every Girl's Sweetheart* to fall back upon; they acknowledge I am not too old at fifty for an editress."

She had not saved much, this criminally improvident lady. Her brother's family were not the only poverty-stricken relatives she possessed: she had two sisters in very poor circumstances, one an ex-governess and invalid, the other married to a struggling city clerk, and this sister had a lot of children. Consequently the rash authoress was now reduced to living rather sparely after her years of plenty.

She had neither room nor money for the twins, and taking the bull by the horns, managed to say so.

The twins opened their eyes very wide. Wasn't lucky Aunt Luce the rich relation? Didn't she make simply hundreds a year, and only herself to spend it on? Wasn't she an editress and authoress of note? And she said she hadn't any money! Not that, for one moment, they would have taken a penny of her money.

Meg dashed the two cheques down before her aunt. "Don't you see?" she exclaimed. "It's only a bedroom we want, and that's for our board and things, as long as it lasts. I've come to get work, Dosé to get a husband. Do you know one that would do? He's got to be young, handsome, rich, and simply awfully nice. Dosé is rather fussy, she's got to be able to love and respect him too. She prefers the Sir Galahad sort, the kind you can turn loose in the Venusberg and things, and feel quite comfortable about. He simply wouldn't notice anything," she grinned at her aunt. "Rather an ass!" she concluded.

"I never said anything like that, never!" protested Dosé, very pink.

"You know everything has got to be white and pure and bright," retorted Meg, and turned from sister to aunt; "that's how Dosé is, and always will be. She can't help it."

"Well, horrid things are so—so horrid," faltered the accused.

"So you see, Aunt Luce," it was Meg speaking, "there mustn't be anything horrid about the husband you get for Dosé."

"The husband I get for Dosé?" repeated the confused Miss Lister.

"That's it, thought you'd rise to it! Just rich and young and handsome, and someone she can look up to and all that, and of course he must have at least one carriage."

Miss Lister waved despairing hands. "Oh dear!" she exclaimed helplessly.

"There were only boys at home and at the school. Besides, we've got the order of the boot. We're prodigals, without a fatted calf handy. The better they are at preaching like some we know," she winked gracelessly at her aunt, "the worse at practising! We all wanted the cash, had a tussle, and we won! There it is!" She tapped the cheques triumphantly again. "Long before it is finished we——"

Miss Lister put her hands to her ears. "One minute! Let Dosé explain, she is much less prodigal of words."

So Dosé explained.

"It's just what Meg says, Aunt Luce. Father has turned us out because of the money and us eating the 'devil'; he likes it better than anything, you know. So we've come to you, and will you put us up while we look round a bit? Meg wants to be a famous author like you, and I'm rather an ass, and can't do anything, so I'm going to try and get married as soon as possible, and I've had three proposals already, though Meg says they don't count because they were boys; and, fancy! one of them proposed to Meg! Do you know lots of famous authors?"

Miss Lister did not commit herself. She was indeed too bewildered to do more than gasp.

"Of course you do! Famous people always know each other. Well, Aunt Luce, I shouldn't mind a famous author so much if he was quite young and rich and handsome, and the sort of person you had to respect; and, of course, he might be able to help Meg. Only he mustn't wear his hair too long, and 'artistic' ties, because I couldn't bear that. And then, marriage is the highest vocation, and the only nice one for a woman." She remembered her aunt's maiden estate, and concluded feebly, "unless they are clever as you are, and Meg thinks she is. Then it's quite different. We——"

"Oh dear! Oh dear! Do stop, Dosé! I seem to have fallen out of the frying-pan into the fire."

"There are editors, publishers, and rising journalists,"

observed Meg thoughtfully. "Dosé might marry one of those; they could help me lots."

"Good Heavens, child, husbands don't grow on every bush! As for your editors and journalists, they don't want wives, not even always when they've got them!" She chuckled at her own jest. "I am ready to admit, now that it is too late, that marriage is perhaps the easiest vocation. Do give me time to think, children! What's this about Meg writing? Thinks all one requires is a pen and ink, I suppose?"

"A typewriter," corrected Meg; "no, I don't quite think that. I've brought it. I studied the stuff in *Every Girl's Sweetheart*, and did one every bit as bad—as good, I mean. Here it is, and there's lots more where this came from." She tapped her forehead. "There's heaps of love and things in it, and of course the hero turns out to be somebody else, and the heroine has golden hair and blue eyes. I copied Dosé exactly," she added.

Dosé looked interested and gratified.

"May I read it?" went on the authoress. "It'll be beastly to read all that wash about love aloud, but it'll fetch 'em all right, you see!" Without waiting for permission she plunged into a vivid love-story.

"Oh!" Dosé clasped delighted hands. "That's lovely, Meg! I never knew you could do things like that! And it's just what I should have done, loved him and trusted him just the same! And then he turned out to be the real heir! Is that what you kept locked up in your drawer?"

"No, it isn't. But I'm glad you like it, you will be handy to try 'em on. Well, Aunt Luce?"

Secretly Miss Lister was rather impressed by the story. Even during her best days she had never written anything fresher, and the characters seemed curiously alive.

"I might be able to use it," she said hesitatingly.

"It's better than lots you have," returned her niece. "How much do you pay, and when? I counted the lengths to get them right. And how often can I do one?"

"My dear child, one's way as a writer isn't as smooth as all that. You take too much for granted. I will read anything you send in and give it my careful consideration."

"Spoken as an editress, not as an aunt!" said Meg reproachfully.

"I cannot make any difference for a relation. The interests of my employers must come first."

"Well, isn't it to their interests to get some decent stuff when they can, grab at talent, and all that? How much do they pay?"

"Five pounds."

"For tosh like that!" Then she remembered that her aunt had lived by such "tosh" for some thirty years, and added hurriedly, "I mean, it didn't seem up to much to me, I could do much better, only of course they would not like that—" she paused, having made a bad matter worse.

"If you think one succeeds in anything without giving one's very best, you make a very great mistake, Margaret," said her aunt grimly.

"Oh, I only meant—I'm awfully sorry, Aunt Luce dear. Some of the other is literary and that sort of thing. But five pounds is toppin', simply toppin'! It did not take very long, and of course I am going to buy a typewriter at once, second-hand. Could I do one every month!"

"I might manage that, but it must be every bit as good as this, there must be no falling below the standard."

Meg opened her dark eyes very wide indeed. "Oh, do you call that good?" she gasped. "Then, of course, the others shan't be any worse, and I'll be making £60 a year out of that paper alone!"

"All that money!" Dosé eyed her sister awe-struck. "Oh, Meg, how clever of you to make all that!" She spoke as if it was already made.

Miss Lister waved helpless hands. It was useless trying to stem the current of their optimism. How young they were! "I was never as young as that!" she thought to herself with a sigh. After all, youth and its certainty was a glorious state of being. The young faces exuded happiness, zest of life, confidence in its good gifts.

Meg was not at all astonished to find herself the possessor of a career and an "income" within an hour of landing in London. She would have been more surprised to find herself without.

"That's all right," she said, "my hash is settled; now

about Dosé's husband? A titled one would be rather nice, and it would be such a sell for father, who has cut us off, and told Dosé she would come to no good. And she'd go down and open his bazaars and——"

"Oh, children, children! Life isn't what you suppose, it isn't easy or simple at all, it's a struggle, a——" she paused, for she had nearly added "tragedy." Certainly one could not associate tragedy with these radiant young people. "You are so sure it's going to be what you wish, my dears, because you are eighteen. At eight-and-twenty——"

"When we are as frightfully old as that," interrupted Meg, "I shall be rich and famous, and Dosé married for years with a dozen children——"

"I shan't," said Dosé indignantly; "not a dozen, only one or two, and very nice ones."

"Listen! Listen! Listen!" Miss Lister was in despair. "I tell you I don't know anybody for Dosé to marry. All the young unmarried men I know are struggling along as best they can."

"Oh, somebody will turn up for Dosé," said Meg confidently, "they always do, and then I shall be getting to know people. That £60 will give me time to write real stuff."

"What do you mean by 'real stuff'?" demanded "Belle L'Esterre."

"Oh, I'm going to be one of the big novelists," calmly announced Meg, "one of those that really count, you know."

"Good Heavens, child, what next? No, no, keep to what you can do and what you'll get paid for. Don't go throwing away the substance for the shadow. If you work hard you may come to take my place some day. But I had to work for my success, it didn't drop into my lap."

"Meg, imagine if you could be a writer like Aunt Luce, and have a dear little flat like this of your own!" Dosé's eyes sparkled.

But Meg shook her head, and her lips set obstinately. "I shan't take more of that sort of work than I can help," she declared, "only just enough to live on. It's the death of ambition for big things—and it's the big things I'm out for!"

"Don't be ridiculous, child!" Miss Lister spoke rather sharply. "You've got swelled head because your first story has been accepted for *Every Girl's Sweetheart*."

"I don't think that would give me swelled head," returned Meg in rather peculiar tones.

Dosé stared from one to the other, puzzled by something she could not understand. Meg didn't seem awfully pleased after all to find she had such a valuable talent! She seemed almost contemptuous. Aunt Luce was "sniffy" about something, seemed looking out for offence. It was very odd.

"When you have been a little longer fighting for recognition, you will think differently, be grateful for help, not scornful of it!" said Miss Lister.

"Oh, aunt, I am grateful, and I do think it awfully jolly of you, only I can't throw over my ideals all at once."

"The sooner the better," returned Miss Lister. "However, you are only eighteen, and are bound to have your head in the clouds till you come closer to life. I had myself once. But about staying here. I can just pack you in for a week or two if that will do, but I positively can't manage after that. It will give you time to look round, and there's that two hundred at the back of you. Of course I shan't touch a penny of it. How dare you insult me with such a suggestion! I am only too delighted to have you! You will make no difference in any way!" She wondered if their young appetites were as ruthless as ever. She hoped not.

She looked out of the window and her face cleared. "Why, here's Bruce Daventry coming across the street. How very fortunate! We'll talk over matters together. He's had a dozen years of Fleet Street. He used to make a great fuss of you once, but I suppose you have forgotten him."

Dosé, her face pale, her eyes shining, was the first to speak, Meg coming in second with the same incredulous exclamation: "Forgotten Bruce?"

"Is he a successful writer now?" asked Meg.

Miss Lister smiled a little pityingly. How the plain child's mind dwelt on the one subject! And how the pretty child dwelt on the other!

"He's much where he was ten years ago, and where he'll

be ten years hence. He makes a little by his pen, not much; but he's got the editorship of *The Old Brigade* and is running it on newer principles. He thinks he is going to increase the circulation and make it pay; I doubt it."

"I expect he will," burst out Dosé defiantly, "he always did what he said, and he was very clever and kind and noble."

"Oh well . . . !" Miss Lister shrugged hopelessly. More ideals, it seemed, and these were as absurd as the others. She was very fond of Bruce Daventry, but she did not think of him in such a way, very far from it. She was intensely sorry for him and his broken life, and saw him as a failure and a tragedy. To have him reintroduced in the rôle of hero gave her a sense of impatient amusement.

What an absurd thing was youth, and its impossible standards and ideals!

She remembered the twins had not seen Bruce for twelve years; would they know him?

Their friend had been a handsome young man secure of present and future. This Bruce had been broken on the wheel, robbed of heritage, hope, youth, happiness. He had descended into the depths.

They would meet him after his twelve years' bitter struggle for bread, and the yet more bitter and far vainer effort to forget.

The young faces clouded for an instant as footsteps came across the little passage. This was not Bruce's light, gay tread. He had not come in after all; some stranger, old and tired, had come instead.

But then the door opened, and the wreck of Bruce Daventry entered.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BEGINNING OF A CAREER

"Rose-white youth,
Passionate pale,
A singing stream in a silent vale,
A fairy prince in a prosy tale—
Oh, there's nothing in life so finely frail
As rose-white Youth."

R. HICHENS.

FOR a moment the twins stared at him aghast. Where was the friend of their youth?

At thirty-eight Bruce looked many years older than his age. His hair was grey, where it was not white, and even his dark auburn eyebrows and red-brown eyes seemed to have lost the warm vitality of their colour. His face was lined and weary, and he stooped slightly. The long grinding years had taken their toll of him, had stamped him as a man beaten in the race of life; one to whom the struggle was no longer worth while. The spirit had gone out of him, the zest of life was over. Upon the past he dare not look, the future swung in darkness, and the present was solitude and the daily round. If he dropped in his traces he would leave no blank, there would be none to grieve or notice, many to take his place and do his work better.

Dosé's eyes filled with tears. "Growing-up" had been a great adventure, but while they had been growing up Bruce had been growing old.

Bruce started as he looked from exquisite flushing Dosé to crude sallow-faced Meg of the disconcerting eyes, and his face lightened as he exclaimed: "Why, it's the twins!" He grasped a hand of each, Dosé's soft and warm and small, Meg's hard and long and slender.

"Yes," nodded Miss Lister; "I've been taken by storm! Meg has come to get a living, Dosé to get——"

But she caught Dosé's flushed imploring gaze and paused in time.

Bruce gave an indulgent laugh and drew his chair closer to the lovely twin. "Well, what has Dosé come to get?" he inquired, his eyes very tender. "I'm sure she will get it, whatever it is!" He had never forgotten Dosé or his love for her, and to see her in the flower of her exquisite girlhood was a poignant joy.

Dosé looked down with a vivid blush.

Miss Lister answered for her, rather drily: "Oh, a livelihood," she said.

Dosé stared on at her shoes, her face growing more gloriously pink every moment. What would Bruce think of her if he knew? He must not know. How horrid it sounded now one came to think of it! How he would despise her! She would not be a husband-hunter; she would be a poor down-trodden governess. Tears of self-pity filled her eyes.

Bruce saw the wet eyelashes and the sight stirred him strangely; the heart that had seemed so dead and cold woke with a wild leap, while youth flashed in and out of his face. Dosé earn her own living! Dosé, that peerless white flower and angel, created to be sheltered, worshipped, adored! The very thought was monstrous. He had known she must grow up lovely, but he had not guessed it would mean such loveliness as this. He had not believed it possible for anyone to be so fair.

Indeed, Dorothea Lister, in the days of her youth, was a picture to fill a man's heart as well as his eyes. It was such dependent, clinging loveliness, such sweet, shy womanliness. The speedwell blue eyes, the yellow hair, the skin like a wild rose. She was not tall and she was very engagingly plump, but she was not too plump, as yet.

She wore a blue hat and a blue dress, as near to the colour of her eyes as mere material could get. It was perhaps no wonder that the sunshine fled away from ugly Margaret to linger lovingly round her twin. Dorothea Lister seemed created for sunshine, soft ways, and all the good gifts of the world, while already in Margaret's face was born the look of a struggle.

To say that Meg, at eighteen, was like a young colt is not to flatter the colt, which has a certain air of grace in its

gambols. Meg had, as yet, no grace at all; she was just "a gawk," too tall, too gaunt, too jerky in movement. She took no interest in her appearance, which she considered hopeless, and dressed badly. At this time of her existence she had an appearance of coming through her clothes; wrists, thin ankles, sharp elbows, were always in evidence.

Fortunately, like all the first Mrs. Lister's children, she carried her head well, and had, oddly enough, a long, graceful white throat. Still, against a sallow skin, a mouth that was wide, and rather grim in outline, a nose of no distinction, this was little enough. But for her eyes it would have been too little, but Margaret's eyes really were wonderful. Her hair was thick, coarse, black, and not very long. She did it anyhow, usually in two or three minutes, dragging it back from her long, thin, sallow face.

Yet in spite of all these disadvantages she might have been called interesting, since personality was very strong in her, and her virility was remarkable. Hers was the type which somehow seem born for the hard knocks of the world, to live on the verge of tragedy because they feel too much and too deeply, and seldom choose the easiest way.

If people could have seen only her eyes they would not have wanted ever to see anything else. They were strange, uncivilised, and very vivid eyes; the eyes of those who ride out on forlorn hopes, of those who are always seeking, but because they ask too much, such eyes seldom find. They were capable of many expressions and some of them scarcely did her credit. They were very long and of a curious shade, neither brown nor green, and yet both these things in turn. They had long, thick coarse black lashes, very perfect arched brows sweeping across them, and dropping closely down upon them at the outside angle. They certainly saved her from mediocrity, and helped to label her as she passed through life, "That girl with the eyes."

Even Bruce spared a moment to look away from Dosé and to dwell on Meg's personality with a sudden sense of shock. So this was what the ever-questioning twin had evolved into! A creature of possibilities to say the least of it, and perhaps not all of them desirable ones!

The more he compared these two, thought of them

entering upon life in the same hour, Meg a trifle ahead, the more he marvelled. Dosé was so much the perfect finished article, Meg so essentially the raw product.

He was not surprised when Miss Lister spoke laughingly of the dark twin's ambitions, but he did not laugh. Rather was he saddened; he saw too many artistic tragedies around him, and there had been his own to make him a little doubtful of talent, or success, or the things he had once sought so eagerly. Was Meg to be just another failure? Would she need ten years to realise her own limitations? Or was she to be, as her shining radiant eyes seemed to assure him, one born to greatness after all?

Meg seemed to guess the meaning of his troubled gaze. "I love fighting," she said gaily, "and life's such fun! Interesting things are happening every minute, and why shouldn't some of them happen to me? Did you ever see such a fright as I've grown up, and Dosé looking like a blessed angel all the time! Not that she is, though, but of course men always think faces like that must have angel-souls. But when they take her out to tea and pay for her 'angel' appetite, they start guessing a bit, and guess right! Aren't we an awful contrast? And Dosé knows how to dress too, and has nice long hair. You should see it down!"

Bruce laughed, and Miss Lister looked up in surprise. It was the first time she had heard him laugh since he had left Daventry. If the twins could teach him that, it was well that they had come.

She considered him afresh, and came to the conclusion that, if no longer handsome, he was certainly a very interesting-looking man, and had an air of breeding and distinction that made him noticeable among his fellows.

Then something made her look at Dosé, and Dosé was gazing at her hero with all the old adoration in her soft blue eyes.

"Hum!" said Miss Lister to herself, not certain if she were pleased or not. "The little monkey! She's not losing much time! And the man is done for, whether he knows it or not!" She did not, however, mention her suspicions to Meg during the days that followed.

Meg had little thought to spare from her own concerns,

which were proving rather interesting. It seemed to her that already fortune, to be quickly followed by fame, was within her grasp.

Miss Lister had shown the story by "Tom Knox" to the elder Fairchild brother without mentioning her relationship to the writer, and Mr. Richard Fairchild had been pleased to approve of it, and to rate the possibilities of its author very highly. Then Miss Lister told him who "Tom Knox" was, and he was further interested, for in her day "Belle L'Esterre" had been very popular as a writer, and was valuable in her capacity of editress now. He told her that he saw a distinct future for Meg in his firm, and that she was to receive every encouragement.

Then the gratified aunt sent for the niece, who was not as excited at her good fortune as she ought to have been, and Mr. Richard Fairchild had shaken hands with Meg and been very gracious. He pointed out that they had a great many papers, and that Meg was at liberty to send in contributions to any or all, and that a quick writer made a good income. He congratulated her upon the freshness and ardour of her love passages, and wondered if such ardour was in ratio to the plainness of the writer, for he thought Meg uncommonly plain. After the honey came the sting. She was to avoid this and that, a certain "literary" affectation; she was to be dramatic, and never artistic.

Meg listened with downcast eyes. Her face was very serious and respectful; her eyes, if the great man could only have guessed it, were very far from being either. It certainly never dawned upon him that Meg had ambitions above the firm of Fairchilds.

Then she was graciously dismissed, and sought her gratified aunt, who pointed out that never was such a lucky girl. "To drop into Fairchilds right away!" she exclaimed.

"Till I drop out," retorted Meg.

"It will be your own fault if you do," returned Miss Lister sharply. "I have never known Mr. Richard Fairchild show more interest, even in the work of our leading writers. He even said you would be one of our first."

"I shall never be that," answered Meg, her eyes already on the shadow rather than the substance.

THE BEGINNING OF A CAREER 191

"I am glad to see a glimmer of modesty at last!" exclaimed her aunt.

Meg laughed, but she did not explain.

"You can do another tale each month, on approval of course, for *The Family Letter*; that will mean ten pounds a month, and if you improve there will be others to write for. You seem very quick, and you will be making a good income before long, I daresay. We had a writer who with 'long completes' and serials made an income close on four figures."

"Money is not everything," began Meg.

"It is very nearly everything. But you have got to work for it. If you get careless or indifferent you will lose your great chance. I wish you would realise how extraordinarily lucky you have been; but when you have been in Fleet Street longer you will realise more."

"Yes, but you haven't got a husband for Dosé yet, and surely that would be much easier."

"You look after your own concerns, matrimonial or otherwise, and leave Dosé to hers, my dear. She's more capable than you think."

"I shan't have any matrimonial concerns," returned Meg grandly, "one hasn't time with a career on hand. I shan't bother about marrying for years, if ever. Anyone can get a husband, but anyone can't have a great career."

Miss Lister was irritated, and she had to remember Meg's youth and ignorance to enable her to keep her temper.

"Haden't you better wait till you're asked?" she retorted.

"Well, I have been," returned Meg triumphantly, "and I said 'No, thank you'—or at least 'No'; I believe I forgot the 'thank you.'" And she laughed. "But I am worried about Dosé. She sees nobody, only Bruce Daventry."

"Leave the child alone, she is more capable than you think," repeated Miss Lister, and closed the discussion.

Dosé was indeed attending to her own matters effectively enough, and had Bruce Daventry as her devoted worshipping slave.

From the moment he had entered Miss Lister's flat and seen Dosé, a veritable queen of youth and beauty, looking up at him with shy welcome, the editor of *The Old Brigade* had been swept off his feet by humble adoring love. He knew it must be hopeless, but he made no resistance, and

for the second time let fate do with him what it would. He was poor, old—he was twenty years her senior—dull, unattractive, and she was just beginning her lovely young life. Yet he brought her flowers and chocolates, took her to the theatres, and behaved just as foolishly as any of the boy-lovers.

Dosé welcomed him with a blush, and parted from him with a sigh. She was head over ears in love with her childhood's hero, but dare not hope such a figure of romance would stoop to one so ordinary as herself. She loved his grey hair, his air of distinction, and wondered how she could ever have found a boy attractive. He was the fairy prince, handsome, bold, clever, the noblest hero in the world. All the dreams of roseate youth clung round this failure and sinner. Of course he would want a brilliant, clever wife, one more worthy of him . . . and Dosé would cry into her pillow.

When Bruce loved Dosé, he loved for the first and last time in his life, and no love was ever more beautiful, more reverent, more radiant. He told himself it was enough to have known the best and highest, to have seen the ideal shining at last, and that Dosé would marry some gallant young lover.

At first conversational enough—Dosé was rather a talker—there came a time when long silences reigned, broken only by jerky inconsequent sentences, and eyes carefully avoided eyes. Betrayal lay in a glance, and both were aware of it.

He did not want to trouble her with his hopeless love, cause her tender heart regret and pain; she did not want him to despise her for hers.

But when, coming home one night from the theatre, a hansom driver took a corner too sharply, and flung Dosé into Bruce's only too ready arms, matters somehow arranged themselves. For Bruce did not let her go, but, losing his head, kissed her hair, and poured incoherencies into her ear. And Dosé said, "Yes, oh! Yes . . . thanks, awfully," also not knowing, or caring, what she said. So it was arranged there and then, though, as a matter of fact, Bruce had never put the important question into words.

The lovers entered Miss Lister's flat spreading radiance, and seemed to think nobody had ever got engaged before. They were disappointed that Miss Lister took it so calmly,

THE BEGINNING OF A CAREER 193

but they had the satisfaction of amazing Meg, who could only mutter at intervals, "Well, I'm blown!" and other school-girl exclamations.

She was pleased when she came to think it over, but rather bored with the sentimental glamour they flung over everything. In spite of the writing of moving love scenes, Meg had little sentiment in her composition, and though she was fond of Bruce, to have him presented—specially when she was trying to get to sleep—as a figure of romance, both amused and irritated her.

"Messrs. Lancelot & Galahad," she grumbled to her aunt, "and I doubt either if you ask me! Of course Dosé's one of your white-angel sort of people that can't look at earthly stains. Bruce has always been her god, and I hope he won't find it too much fag living in the clouds for a bit. Then he thinks she's a wonder-angel, and she's just a sentimental little duffer with a 'I'll love you and look up to you,' that appeals to men, specially the men who aren't awfully strong, but like to think they are. I wish he was better off. However, since they think themselves so awfully in love——"

"They are very much in love, Meg, and it's the right sort of love, too."

"If illusion is the right sort . . ." scoffed Meg. "Still, they are sure to be happy. Dosé will certainly be the ideal wife; she won't be content with loving and respecting, she'll obey her husband, too!" She seemed to find something humorous in the idea.

Miss Lister looked at her disapprovingly. "That sort of thing works best in the end," she stated.

"But she won't respect, etc., etc., because he's worthy of it, but because he's her husband, and I don't see what that has to do with it."

"You'll never get married, that's certain!" exclaimed Miss Lister.

"Wait till I try!"

"You are the most conceited girl I ever knew! You think everything is just a question of trying, and that if you try hard enough you are bound to succeed."

"Well, you can't without. But what about L. S. D.? What are the he-angel and she-angel to live upon, bar love?"

"Bruce gets about £200 a year for the editorship of *The Old Brigade*, and it ought to be sure, but I doubt it. The paper is slowly, but surely, dying. Then he makes another £100 at outside contributions."

"It's not much," said Meg, "but I suppose it can't be helped, and after all Bruce is Bruce, and a perfect dear! I daresay I shall make more than I need, and Dosé and I always share."

"Your optimism is as vast as your conceit. Mr. Richard Fairchild was not pleased with that last story you sent in. He said it was carelessly put together, and the plot similar to one you had used before."

"I daresay I do repeat myself without knowing. You see, I do it quite mechanically."

"Don't be a fool, Meg. The Fairchilds are not to be trifled with. They give good pay, good treatment, and they expect good work."

"Good work! That's the last thing they want."

"I am not talking of *belles lettres*, my dear child. They want interesting, well-written stories, and they can get them, if not from you, from another."

"I am sorry, Aunt Luce. Really I will be more careful."

She was sobered, for without the Fairchilds' money she would be beggared indeed. Her ambitious efforts had met with no encouragement whatsoever. They were always promptly returned, and not always with thanks.

Now a sudden disturbing thought occurred. "Aunt Luce, are twins hereditary?" she demanded.

Miss Lister gasped, following her thoughts. "Of course not, child!"

"Well, I am going to live with them, and I couldn't stand twins. I remember what we were. No one could have written or anything while we were about, and then it's double the expense. Oh, I do hope——"

Miss Lister was cross. "Must you always be before events?" she asked.

"One ought to be prepared for the worst," returned Margaret.

To Dosé she said, grinning: "You promised not to marry a man without money. Where's his carriage?"

"Oh, an ordinary man, but Bruce——"

"You will have to live in a horrid poky little villa, my lady."

"I'd live in a garret!" cried Dosé passionately, and she meant it.

"You'll live in the clouds, you little idiot!" returned the disgusted Margaret. "Well, come along, and let's house-hunt. After all, it's my concern as well as yours, as I'm to live with you and go shares."

A tiny villa in a distant suburb was eventually found. It had a tiny garden and a field opposite. "It's quite country!" exclaimed Dosé, who saw everything through rose-coloured glasses.

But Meg didn't. "Oh, quite," she observed, "if that field opposite were populated with cows instead of tin cans and dead dogs, and contentious cats, we could call the villa 'Truly Rural,' and go out in sun-bonnets."

Nothing, however, damped Dosé, who only smiled in absent dreamy fashion and thought of Bruce.

Bruce had some furniture of his own, and the twins had the greater portion of their cheques left. It happened that a large house in the neighbourhood was having a sale, and the rash adventurers obtained good furniture at second-hand prices. The landlord papered and painted the house for them, and since they all had taste in such matters, a very dainty, fresh-looking home was the result. Dosé described the drawing-room as a dream, and took an inordinate pride in it. It had a plain cream paper, cream paint, and a frieze of salmon-pink trailing roses. The carpet was a deep pink, and the chintz covers matched perfectly. The effect was very cool and fresh.

They were married in June, and snatched a brief honeymoon in Cornwall, and Meg, keeping house in their absence, hoped they would return "sensible people," and was annoyed when they came home more idiotically in love than ever. "You make me ill," she complained to her sister, a twinge of jealousy assailing her.

Dosé was very much wife and very little sister during these idyllic days. She lived in the clouds, and in her world there was only room for two, and Bruce was almost as bad. He could not realise his own happiness, his own astonishing good fortune. He was for ever expecting to wake up and find it all a dream.

"If only I could have brought you to a better home, my darling!" And he thought of the home that would have been hers but for his own sin. "It's so unworthy of my Dorothea, my gift of God!"

But to Dosé the cheap little villa was paradise enough.

At the end of about eighteen months, Meg packed up her things in disgust, and shook the dust of "Mayfield Villa" off her feet, for the disturbing element had arrived! True, it had arrived in the singular number, and not the plural, and was the joy and delight of its proud and infatuated parents, and a fine, beautiful baby; but Meg hardened her heart against it. There was simply nothing of the old Dosé left now, and the sisters were drifting apart.

They almost quarrelled over the baby. Dosé had informed her sister of the expected event with joyful luminous eyes, and had expected Meg to be equally awe-struck and delighted, and Meg had only said in her horrible slang way, "What a nuisance! What a perfectly beastly nuisance! Of course it will yowl all night! They always do."

Dosé replied rather tartly that it would not "yowl" at all; it was not going to be that sort of a baby; it was hers and Bruce's, and consequently quite different from ordinary babies.

"These potty little villas aren't built for babies!" Meg returned. "Where are you going to keep it? In the garden?"

Then Dosé swept from the room. "You are not being funny, Meg, you are only being very silly and vulgar. 'T any rate, we won't ask you to nurse it!"

Of course Meg melted at that, and the twins became friends again.

Then the little daughter, so like her mother, arrived, and "took up the whole earth," as Meg complained. It cried when Meg was hardest at work, and of course she had to help Dosé to soothe it, and her work and temper suffered. "I knew it would be a yowler!" she said, when it really had cried rather a lot. However, by the time the child was six months old it was from its appealing fascination rather than from its "yowling" she fled. It would lie and smile and chuckle at its aunt, and of course it usually gained its own way, and Meg's strong young arms. The writing suffered more and more.

THE BEGINNING OF A CAREER 197

"There's not room for a budding author and a baby," sighed Meg, "and as you won't send the baby away, it will have to be me. Tubbs is too wee to be turned out."

Poor Dosé had had the child christened Josephine, partly because it was a favourite name, and partly because it was pleasing in its shortened form of José; but one day, for no reason whatever, Meg alluded to the exquisite little creature as "Tubbs," and Tubbs she remained to the end of her days.

Bruce could not understand how Meg could find it possible to tear herself away from such a sister and such a niece; but the little family were almost happier without the energetic and unromantic member.

Meg certainly left a blank behind her for such hours as Bruce was away and she had been at liberty, and Dosé found it hard to be parted from her masterful twin for the first time. There were, however, household matters and the baby to keep her very much occupied, to say nothing of the problem of making a very little money go a long way.

Meg's pound a week was very much missed, and at a time when it was specially needed. Tubbs made a vast difference for such a small person. She could not be stinted in any way; she must have the best of everything as a matter of course. The fluctuating £300 with Meg's £52 had just kept the household going without the baby, and was no more than adequate. So much had to come out of it, for they were half an hour out of town, and there were doctors' and chemists' bills now.

Bruce began to see debt ahead, and was haunted lest anything should happen to him, and his idolised wife and child be left to a hard world. His lovely dependent Dosé in grief, in loneliness, in want! It would wring his heart to picture it.

Of course she would marry again, but she would not care as she cared for him, and never would another man understand her, and shield her as he did, or love her as much. Everything that was ugly he hid away from her. He kept her in a little fool's paradise where no snake might enter. Then Tubbs? Tubbs with a jealous step-father, or Tubbs shabby and hungry? These things were with him always, an ever-present agony.

Then he would look at the other side of the shield, at the

might-have-been. Dosé would not be turning a shabby old frock and spoiling her pretty hands in household drudgery, growing anxious about bills, and living in a poky little villa. She would be Lady Daventry of Daventry Castle, a great beauty, a happy hostess.

He put his hand before his eyes and groaned. Was his punishment never to end? Was he always to remember how he had deprived his own wife of all that made life easy and joyous? Was this God's justice? For the one sinner only triumph, riches, honour; for the other, long years of remorse and shame and suffering, ruin, disgrace, almost death, and now to see wife and child suffer too?

"If they could see ahead who would choose sin?" he asked himself.

At times he could forget, but never for very long. Even with Dosé happily asleep in his arms, it sat on his pillow, that old dead sin, a little asp of anguish striking venomously at them both and at their child.

It was well when the dark hour had passed and happiness come again, and well too to know the darkness unguessed of the beloved.

Dosé had her house dainty, her person neat, and Tubbs shone snowily always, while the plainest meal was nicely served. It was poverty, but not sordid poverty. Poverty hand in hand with love and beauty, not poverty in rags.

After his dingy office and trying day, seated in their pretty drawing-room, with Dosé pouring out his tea, and making him eat of her home-made cake, and Tubbs demurely on a stool by his side, there was no man in the world with whom Bruce would have changed places, not even for the sake of a clear conscience and rest at last.

CHAPTER XXV

NO. 29, CALLOGAN MANSIONS

. . . "By the bear oppressed . . ."—EDMUND WALLER.

MEANWHILE Meg's car of fate had whirled her down another road, a long road, and one that, as far as she could see, had no turning.

She arrived at an ancient house in Chelsea, now converted, more or less efficiently, into flats and portions of flats, and she demanded to see the accommodation advertised as No. 29.

The housekeeper, a person wrapped in shawls and everlasting gloom, informed the inquirer that Callogan Mansions was sacred to the male sex, and that 29 was specially sacred, being actually the half of 28, which was inhabited by a gentleman of woman-hating proclivities.

"He wouldn't have you in the Manshings, and sharin' with him, no, not for nothink!"

Whereupon Meg decided that she would take up her abode at 29, Callogan Mansions, whatever came or went. "Is he the landlord?" she demanded.

The housekeeper confessed that No. 28 had no such legal right.

"Then it is for the landlord to say whether he will accept me as tenant or not," replied Margaret calmly, "and for me to say whether I think No. 29 will suit me." And she went direct to the landlord.

That person had had No. 29 too long on his hands to object to Margaret. If she had been pretty or flighty-looking he might have refused her application; as it was her plain face and direct air disarmed him. She also spoke of paying her first quarter's rent the day she took up her residence at 29, and somehow gave the impression of a satisfactory bank balance, which was rather clever of her,

seeing that her balance was very far from satisfactory, and she was trusting to "luck" and Fairchilds to pay her way.

Then she returned to Callogan Mansions and inspected 29, which she hoped would prove as cheap as it sounded. It really was rather a bargain, and she took an instant fancy to it.

Its chief disadvantage was its connection with 28, since 28 and 29 were actually one flat, though let out in two, the passage being the only separation between the two sets of rooms. Then the bathroom and kitchen had to be shared. Meg had the kitchen on her side of the passage, but the common bathroom was in No. 28.

"It's awkward," thought Meg, frowning, "but it can't be helped, and anyway the pig," for so she already called the unknown woman-hater, "isn't going to have it all his own way."

She really had obtained a bargain, for Nos. 28 and 29 (attic floor) consisted of two large sitting-rooms, as well as four other rooms of varying size. No. 28 had the largest sitting-room and the largest bedroom; but No. 29 had the prettiest shaped sitting-room, with the quaint windows, quite a fair-sized bedroom, with another next door, and one tiny attic compartment. The rent was slightly larger than that paid for No. 28.

The housekeeper, who regarded women as more exacting and less remunerative than men, did all she could to dissuade Meg from taking the rooms; but without result. She hinted darkly that the man, to whom she alluded as "'E" or "'Im," would make the life of the new tenant unbearable. "'Ow he will take sharin' the bath I can't think," she groaned; "that will put him out awful, that will."

"Then he can go without a bath," returned Meg contemptuously.

But the housekeeper bridled and said that he'd sooner die.

So Meg, for good or ill, took 29, Callogan Mansions, and was to sleep under its wide flat roof for many a long year to come.

She furnished with an extravagance that would have shocked her more careful twin, but, in her eyes at least, the result justified her rashness, for a very delightful home came into being.

The big room with the quaint windows was got up as a drawing-room, a place to be idle and rest in. The second big room made a bedroom, the third, a place of disorder, was her writing-room, and into the little attic she thrust her boxes and packing cases. On the gas stove in the kitchen she cooked her own lighter meals, and cooked them rather badly.

There were traces of the occupant of No. 28 in the kitchen, but no sign of his actual presence, and Meg had forgotten his existence, when it was recalled to her in a somewhat dramatic fashion.

She was coming up the stairs to her portion of the flat—Callogan Mansions boasted no lift, only a very long straight staircase of countless stairs, with a wide polished bannister—when a bibulous-looking charwoman cannoned into her, followed by fierce invective from a man's lips, and the slam of No. 28 sitting-room door.

"It's im, on the rampage!" gasped the woman faintly, clutching Meg. "Oh, my pore 'eart! 'Ere I be come over faint-like and no brandy nor nothink 'andy!" She moaned, grasping Meg more closely.

"I think I have a flask somewhere," said Meg. She did not know that Mrs. Simms was seldom sober, and never from choice. She was, however, a very thorough cleaner, and the woman-hater had, it appeared, fads on that subject. The housekeeper "did not hold" with them, consequently he got outside aid, and Mrs. Simms was the result.

Meg heard a growl and thought she caught the words "damned female." She was disgusted, and ready to take the charwoman's side against the enemy.

"You should not let him use such language about you," she said grandly.

Mrs. Simms ceased from being "come-over faint," and opened an astonished eye. "Gor' bless me, miss! why, it were you 'e were a-talkin' of!"

"Me!" gasped Meg.

"There! I'm goin' hoff, I do declare!" The speaker leaned a crushing weight on Meg.

"Come with me to my flat, I'll get you brandy," said the girl.

Then the door of 28 opened, a dark, clean-shaven face was thrust out, eyes of piercing steel gleamed at Meg.

"You're not to give that creature brandy," said a harsh voice, "she's half drunk already!"

"Me!" exclaimed the injured lady. "What an ideash! 'E's drunk, that's what's the matter with 'im!"

Meg disengaged herself. "Oh, go away!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, damn it!" came an infuriated voice from above, and Meg looked up and laughed. The woman-hater had taken a headlong flight over the bucket of dirty water left by the charwoman. There was a rush of water, and a rush of very bad language.

Meg sat down on the stairs and laughed till her sides ached; the charwoman seating herself beside her, breathing heavily in her face. "Talk of 'usbints," she moaned, "why, 'usbints ain't nothink to the likes of 'im!"

"Come here at once, woman!" shouted the victim of her carelessness.

"I dassent! Talk of 'usbints——"

"Take that, then!" The speaker was plainly beside himself, and the empty bucket hurtled towards them.

"Look what you're doing!" cried Meg, jumping up and only just missing the bucket, which crashed to the bottom of the long straight stairs.

For reply there came a sound of mopping accompanied by language that could only have been learned at sea.

"Do you know I can hear what you say?" demanded Meg hotly.

"You needn't listen!" snarled the voice from above. "Where's that infernal bucket? Bring it up, you!" This was addressed to the charwoman, who still sat moaning helplessly on the stairs, murmuring repeatedly, "I tell you 'usbints ain't nothink to 'im!" The speaker held a large sopping towel in his hand, and the dirty water ran from it on to the floor and his feet.

Meg looked up, her eyes gleaming. "Fetch it yourself!" she said. Dignity had long since departed from all of them.

The woman-hater was incapable of retort. Women hated him, as he them; in place of his contempt they had fear.

Then Meg pointed to the sopping towel and laughed again. "Of all the silly sights——!" she began.

The man gasped and flung the towel to the ground, perhaps lest he should be tempted to cast it into Meg's

face, and forget that once, many years ago, he had been a gentleman, and courteous inwardly and outwardly to all women. But he had been an Eton school-boy with a name then, an honourable name. That boy had died since, and another, without a name at all, had taken his place, and sweated in the foul fo'c's'les of ships, and had his place with the outcast scum of the ports of many nations. Adam Coneybeare-Fiffe had been down in the depths, and their mark was on him. The crude savage, with no belief in God or man, and worse than no belief in woman, had killed the Eton boy, to whom there was no physical resemblance left.

He had written articles, bitter, vivid, horrible articles, of those depths, and a certain paper had taken them in all their terrible realism, and given him his first chance in the world of journalism. He left the sea and came to Fleet Street. He had his place there now, a not unimportant place, if not a very profitable one. He was critic on a literary paper of influence in a small literary circle, but not of large circulation. He wrote cynical essays for it too, and paper and writer kept their heads above water waiting for the tide to turn. His work was good but too cruel for popularity. He had to forge his way rough-hewn through a rock of prejudice, seeking to compel recognition rather than ask for it. His criticisms were trenchant and dreaded, and of considerable importance as far as an exclusive set was concerned. Among this set "A. B." could make or mar a literary reputation. That he usually marred might be the fault of the makers of books, or of his own bitter temperament. His motto, "If my fathers have chastised you with whips, I will chastise you with scorpions," was put to the proof many times a year. Writers dreaded his reviews. Once or twice he had praised, and that book at least became notable in the literary world, whatever it might be with the populace. Once or twice he had even marked out a man for greatness, and people said he did not often make mistakes. *The Weekly Flail* was the only paper that would venture to print his criticisms and articles as they were written: others would only take them modified, till he became the fashion if he ever did, and Adam Beare refused to modify; therefore his living was more bare than need be, seeing that about his cleverness there could be no doubt.

Even his justice was cruel, ironic; and of mercy or generosity he knew nothing. He was an Ishmael in a wilderness of desert acrid sand, with his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him.

For women, and women's work, he kept his cruellest mockery, and most bitter satire. Nothing they could do could please him; their very existence was a crime. Their work must necessarily be false to life and false to art, since it was the work of the false, vile sex. If his own beautiful mother had not escaped the taint, if icy Lady Daventry had stooped so immeasurably low, where was one of the righteous to be found?

The downfall or failure of every man he held the work of some woman. The fairer the face, the darker the soul; the weaker sex, ironically so called, since they were the stronger for evil.

No woman had ever been in his life, and no woman should ever cast the briefest spell over him.

For the word "love" he had only a very ugly term; his face was turned from all that was beautiful, from ideals, from the best of life. For him there was no such thing as romance; no nobility in any marriage.

Marriage! He would laugh and sneer. Just Nature's trap, the bait of civilisation! Marriage was in reality the very antithesis of Nature, and a far less admirable institution. "Masked hypocrisy," he called it.

He was a recluse, knew nothing of friendship, but lived very bitterly and disagreeably for himself alone, and if he took pleasure in anything, it was to know himself regarded with fearsome awe by all women.

And this gaunt, hooligan creature had laughed in his face!

They stood staring at each other, the dirty, sopping towel between them, while the charwoman still moaned about "'usbints!"

"Your manners are really rather horrid," said the girl coolly.

Adam did not answer. He dare not trust himself to speak. He wanted to shake Margaret. He looked her brutally up and down.

"She's no trap as far as beauty is concerned!" he thought, "and appallingly young and crude. It is even worse than I feared."

"Let him think me ugly, what does it matter?" Meg demanded of herself. "A brute like that!"

Their eyes met, and Adam frowned. He could not gain-say the beauty of these very remarkable eyes, and they annoyed him. They had something rather great behind them, and what right had any woman to even the shadow of greatness!

As they stood thus, the rage went out of the man's face, and something less human came into it. He bowed ironically, even smiled, a smile like a blow. "So you are the brave intruder into this rabbit-warren of bachelors! Umph!" He could say "umph" more offensively than any man in London.

"You needn't bother to 'umph' at me," said Meg cheerfully. "I don't know your real name, or want to, but I think I shall call you Rochester like that silly glary thing in 'Jane Eyre' who was always making himself so ridiculous, only Jane Eyre never seemed to see it. And she was meek, I'm not. Besides," she added grandly, "she was a poor, downtrodden governess, and I'm an author."

At this youthful bombast Adam laughed, not very pleasantly. "Indeed, madam! We are honoured, it seems! And which type of 'angel unaware' are you? Is it 'The Family At Home,' or Fairchilds' slop?"

Meg looked dashed for a moment. "If it's Fairchilds' slop for a living, it's quite decent stuff for something else some day! One of these days even that pig 'A. B.' who slashes at everything and everybody like a—*a bull in a china shop*——" it was the only simile she could think of, and not in the least appropriate, for Adam's methods were those of the rapier, but it annoyed him intensely.

"Yes, like a bull in a china shop," she went on, "simply smashing up everything in his clumsy way, even he will have to give me a decent line. I wonder who 'A. B.' stands for?"

"I am only too happy to relieve your curiosity, madam, and to introduce, very much at your service, Adam Beare, otherwise 'A. B.' of the *Flail*." There was a biting, blighting east wind in his laugh.

At the moment, however, she could only think of his startling announcement. "What, you! Great Cæsar!" she gasped. Inwardly she was rather shaken. It was not

well to fall out with critics on the threshold of one's career.

But the mischief was done now. She had burned her boats, and she was not going to exhibit her dismay.

"Well, you won't get a bang at my masterpiece just yet, Mr. A. B."

"Your masterpiece! Youth is always confident, I find. I never argue with a woman."

"I wouldn't if I were you," she returned softly, "you never know when you might meet an intelligent one." And this time it was she who laughed, joyously, musically. Oh, life was fun!

Adam was choking with wrath and hatred of this impertinent young creature who had taken up her abode on his very landing. "Might I ask the name of the latest literary wonder?" he inquired.

"Margaret Lister."

He started slightly, and his face darkened. This horrible girl belonged to the horrible past. She had even kissed him once, against his will. The blood flew to his face in a violent torrent. Must the past ever rise from its grave? There had been another child, a pretty, fair thing, and an abomination they had called the "orpin" if he remembered correctly. His memory was far too excellent for his own liking.

"I'm going to make it one of the big names," she stated positively. "You'll see!"

"I'm sure I shall."

"Oh, all right, you needn't believe me if you don't want to. You are as bad as my father, though he's a clergyman. And clergymen never believe in anything," she added.

Adam gasped, as well he might! Then he turned, his door banged, and he had gone. The episode was over.

That night Meg, who heard from Philip constantly, and wrote only when it occurred to her, scrawled a line in answer to the last dozen letters she had received. "I'm living with a Bear," she concluded, "but it's fun. Life is so awfully jolly, don't you find it so?"

CHAPTER XXVI

A YOUTHFUL PRANK

"You must not expect old heads upon young shoulders."—*Proverb.*

"**L**IFE is awfully jolly," echoed Philip, and sighed as he read Margaret's letter. He had not found it so. Daventry had been bad, but Eton was worse; loneliness in solitude is easier to bear than loneliness in a crowd. All round him was merry, sociable youth, each with his friend or friends; only Philip, as ever, walked alone. He was too shy, too diffident, too humble, to obtain the friendship he coveted. He had only been allowed the little Baroness as playfellow at home, the stiff, elderly tutor who had never been young, and he was agonisingly dumb among his fellows.

He was ridiculed, teased, and forgotten. "Oh, leave the Daventry kid alone," boys said, "he's a rum 'un; he likes his own company best."

And so the solitary little figure took its solitary way, and at night when others slept, Philip's pillow knew bitter tears, and a bitter heartache. School was to have opened the gates of life to him; instead it shut them in his face.

Before he left home his mother had laid down certain laws for him; he was to do this, he was not to do that. He must not run any undue risk; he was the last Daventry, such a position had its responsibilities. He might spend as much money as he liked, in reason of course; he might have his horse, the quiet animal he rode at home. He was not to make undesirable friendships; he must never forget that he was Lord Daventry.

Philip, horribly tired of being Lord Daventry, had made no reply. He had found his position all responsibility, and no pleasure. Was it to be the same story at Eton?

Lady Daventry was much more particular as to his

friends than if she had been born to the position. She had bought the place for them both, bought it dearly, and it must be maintained to the bitter end. Instead of leaving him to find his own friends and his own level as she should have done, she must be guiding and planning still. She knew who of his own years would be up at the same time. She told him who he might choose his friends among. Philip looked at them wistfully, and then shyly away, and they ignored him. He was thought "odd," "sulky," a "mother's darling," and he had to pay for these misconceptions. His first term was a torture.

Meg's letter came to him in a very bitter moment. Things had been better lately, a gleam of light had illumined his solitary way, for Somers, a hero, had paused and said, "Hullo, kid Daventry!" Now this was a great honour. Somers was older, bigger, stronger than Philip, in a higher class, of athletic achievements, and it was extraordinary that he should notice any first-term boy at all. He had spoken several times, always kindly, protectively, and he had let Philip become his devoted slave and accompany him everywhere. Philip was happy at last. He had even learned to bowl to him, and not so badly considering. The hero said he was "promising"; they must see what they could do "next term." The odd friendship strengthened, and one day a wonderful thing happened. Somers looking at photographs of Daventry had remarked, "A decent crib, that?" and Philip, fearing a snub, had stammered forth an invitation for the holidays. To his unspeakable joy it was accepted. He had wondered at his own "check."

He wrote to his mother and his mother replied graciously enough, "By all means bring Somers." She knew Lord Somers' son was up, and the Somers were among the people Philip was permitted to know. Then came another letter from Lady Daventry; she had discovered Philip's was the wrong Somers, the son of a rich, vulgar pill manufacturer who had vainly stormed social doors, and who would certainly not be received at Daventry.

Philip had endured agonies over that letter. The hateful point of view shocked him, the lack of understanding! And how to explain to the "wrong Somers!" (The "right Somers" was worthless and unpopular.) One

could not explain. One could only lie. So the unhappy boy lied his best, but it was not very convincing, and a likely friendship was broken in two, for the "wrong Somers" was proud in his way, and hated snobbery. He had also heaps of friends to choose from, being widely popular and rather sought after as a guest.

It was perhaps a small matter to go close to breaking a boy's heart, but Philip never quite got over it, and the wrong light in which it placed him. He was left quite alone now. Not even his classmates bothered with a "Hullo, kid Daventry!" Nobody bothered about him at all. They supposed if he wanted companionship he would make some effort to obtain it instead of slinking off on his own account, or join in games or something.

Meg's letter came when he had almost given up hope of hearing from her again, and her "life is so jolly" made his lips quiver. Life jolly! Life was hateful, humiliating! Oh, to be a man, to be free! He counted the very days till his manhood should come about.

In a few days he would be back at Daventry again, under the rule of the icy mistress of the castle from whose verdict there was no appeal, sent out to ride with the little Baroness on their stout horses, two stout coachmen behind them, never letting them out of sight. Tennis with the little Baroness who couldn't play, all the long weary days with her or by himself. And then the dreary holiday over, school again, and its disappointments and humiliation!

"When I am a man! When I am a man!" he cried again.

Meg read his letter absently, thrust it absently in her pocket, not realising that the boy still clung to her with admiration and hope, as his only anchor, his only friend. "Poor kid, poor, lonely kid!" she muttered, and in her own joie de vivre promptly forgot all about him till his next rather piteous letter came.

It was so delightful to be independent, on the way to fame and riches, for of course she was well on the way! In a year or two at most, she would show that beast upstairs—pig! Meanwhile she would be just as freezing as he was. He should realise she was not so young, not so crude, but a dignified woman of the world. She was free, free, free, and freedom was the most glorious thing in the world!

210 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

Dosé thought and said that husband and baby were that, but Dosé was a sentimental little donkey ; she didn't know what life meant, nor the glory of a fight. Why, women like Dosé knew nothing ; the arena is not for them ; they have just to take what they are given. They are shut out of the real things, cramped with domesticity. Such was Meg's opinion.

"Awful !" she said to the friend with whom she discussed it at the "Circle Club" where women writers congregated, and to which Miss Lister had introduced her. "I'm ready, even willing, to love all men, bar the Bear, not that they would desire it," she laughed and made a face at herself in the glass, "but thank goodness I'm tied to none."

"I wish I was, even to a fool !" Miss Burney had returned sombrely. "I'm sick of slaving, and homelessness, and loneliness, with only incurable spinsterhood and penury to look forward to ! If I had my way there should be no unmarried woman over thirty in the world !"

"Oh, thirty !" said Meg still making faces in the glass. At nineteen it sounded the end of everything.

"Thirty jumps up at you out of the early twenties," returned Miss Burney, "and I'm thirty-five. I refused my first chance and never got another. I was a fool !" She looked warningly at Meg.

Meg took no warning to herself ; instead she looked at the still handsome, if haggard, face of the other. "Is he still unmarried ? Is it too late ?"

"It is always too late," returned Miss Burney. "He is only thirty-five now, and naturally looks to a younger generation for a wife. He is, in fact, about to marry my niece." She laughed and her laughter spoiled the beauty of the spring day for Meg. She was selfish and "cocksure" at this time, but she had a heart, and plenty of imagination. Miss Burney was "one of the crowd," a mediocrity ; what was there ahead ?

Loneliness, homelessness, failure.

"Well, you buck up, old girl !" was all she found to say in her boyish fashion. "Something is sure to turn up."

"Not happiness," was all Miss Burney answered, and went into the silence room to do her column.

Meg hurried home, and as she walked, she forgot the

unhappy lot of Miss Burney and others like her. It was such a glorious spring day ; she felt so young, so strong, so sure of herself and so much master of her fate. The world was an oyster, ready for her opening. Inside she would find the pearl of great price ; though she did not name it love. Rather was it the prize of fierce endeavour, and successful ambition. As she walked she saw the most magical things, looked into the most wonderful future ; saw herself the centre of the universe. It was just nineteen gone mad. Her head, always carried high, was flung right back ; her eyes sparkled, her lips were parted. Oh, life was good, was good ! Life was a great adventure !

" Oh, poor Dosé," she gasped suddenly, for she and Dosé had been too close for years for the one ever to forget the other for long. " How dull ! How can she bear it ! " That word recalled a fresh train of thought. " Hateful beast ! But I'll show him ! He shan't consider me a raw school-girl. To-night I will be twenty. This is really the last of my youth."

She stepped across the threshold of Callogan Mansions in the highest spirits, drunk with the glorious, incomparable wine of youth.

Her veins were tingling, the sap rising ; she wanted to shout, and dance, and sing. And there was nothing she could do, nothing !

Then suddenly her eyes fell on the wide, polished bannisters, and never were bannisters so irresistibly created for the downfall of woman ! She had the place to herself at this hour as a rule : the " high-and-mighty Bear " would be out. It was safe enough, and it would be such glorious fun. To-morrow she would be twenty ; one could not do that sort of thing when one got out of one's teens, but she had only a few hours left in which to make the most of her fleeting youth. To-morrow she would begin to impress Mr. Beare with her maturity. She was so tall, though the man was vastly taller, that it was easy to be stately. Poor Dosé could never be stately ; she wasn't tall enough, and too plump. " I'd rather be hideous than undersized," Meg decided. " Tiny people merely look ridiculous when they try to be dignified. One expects them to be kittenish, and perhaps they haven't kittenish minds. Now for it ! "

" Whoop ! " she cried as she felt herself rushing down

with delirious velocity. What matter scattering hairpins, a torn flounce, what mattered anything but youth, youth, youth!

"I do believe my blood is bubbling!" she thought exultantly. "What a whizz! What a toppin' whizz!"

She prepared to whizz again.

She had started from the top, and was coming down with ever increasing velocity, when an exclamation brought the blood to her face, and panic to her heart.

For Mr. Beare was coming up the stairs with a laden tea-tray!

He had been down to the dark regions inhabited by the housekeeper and demanded tea, which he was taking up to his own quarters. Sue-Sue did not lay herself out either to "wait" or clean, and as a matter of principle never answered a bell.

Adam stopped short at sight of the wild flurry of petticoats, the waving ankles, and glared with incredulous amazement. This was what had come into the life of the orderly, bachelor chambers he had occupied so long in peace!

"My God!" he exclaimed.

Meg suddenly lost her head. For as she came dashing down on to her enemy, sheer horror made her lose her grip of the rail, and with sickening fear she felt herself whirling through space and right on to the enraged spectator and the stone flags!

In one illuminating instant she saw it all. Her head would smash on the flags "like an egg"; there would be an inquest, the enemy would say, "Serve her right," or at least think it, and be glad to occupy No. 28 peacefully once more. Then would come the funeral, her father with his "I told you so" expression, "and me not there to contradict!" Dosé would cry very bitterly, but she would soon get over it, because she had Bruce and Tubbs, and it was they who counted now, not the twin who had gone out of her life. Nobody would care very much, it would be "a perfectly measly funeral." Of course the orphan would leave school where he was learning as little as possible, but as likely as not he would miss the train in the casual way he had; still, he would be dreadfully upset and not easily consoled, and he would "stand up" to Mr. Lister. Meg was

annoyed because she could not think of anyone else weeping at her untimely end. She had forgotten all about Philip, who would certainly have grieved, perhaps most of all. The others all had somebody between them and a lonely world, but he had only Meg. She was facing the worst tragedy, the passing of that thing she believed herself to possess, with her own life. Death ere birth.

These harrowing thoughts were more than she could endure; she screamed shrilly, and flung up her arms.

Then indignation came to her aid. The enemy was her sole hope, her sole stop, her only salvation. Why didn't he do something instead of standing frozen there, hanging on to the tea-tray as if it was all that mattered? Why didn't he drop the tea-tray and try and catch her? How could she hope to grab him in time at this rate?

"Just like a man!" she thought wrathfully.

"The devil!" burst from Adam. He was paralysed with anger and astonishment.

Something hurtled through the air at him, something grabbed him violently, something gyrated round him; he became the centre of a windmill, a whirlwind. A shoe made for wear and tear struck him on the nose, and brought the blood gushing forth in a torrent. Another foot, Meg seemed all feet, kicked the tray out of his hands, and sent the contents flying, the greater part of them over him. There was butter in his hair, and hot tea down his neck.

And Adam Coneybeare-Ffiffe remembered, not the days of his youth, but his days with the scum of the earth at sea!

Meg heard nothing, cared nothing. She had ceased whirling, and come to anchor round his neck, clutching wildly at his face, his hair, his nose. "Oh, save me!" she panted, kicking.

The whole thing was worse than an outrage, and this abomination had been committed on him by that most utter of all abominations, a woman! You could not strike a woman, or curse her, at least not aloud or to her face. You must control yourself, and fall back on that weakest of all props, irony. And of what service is irony when one wants to rage and curse and strike?

He seized the girl by the waist and set her on her feet with an emphasis that jarred her whole spine. Then he got out his handkerchief and wiped the blood from his face,

and the butter from his hair. His hand shook with fury, and he dare not trust himself to speak.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Margaret, gasping indignantly with the force with which she had been set down. "Oh goodness, what a Waterloo!" She giggled rather hysterically.

Adam turned on her, choking, stammering. "I can only apologise for bleeding before a l-l-lady!" he stuttered. His manipulation of the word "lady" was masterly in spite of the stutter.

"I'm awfully sorry," she faltered, looking at the ruin around her, "but you did simply nothing, you know, and one does expect a man to act in an emergency. But for my presence of mind in grabbing you I should have been killed!"

Adam muttered something incoherent.

"No, it wouldn't have been a good thing!" she cried.

"I never said it would."

"But you thought it! I saw you think it!"

He had, and he made no defence.

"Oh, you do look funny!" She began to laugh, and once started could not stop. It was as much shaken nerves as anything, but Adam could not know that. He could only glare, and go on wiping his bleeding nose.

"I'm awfully sorry about your nose, I am really, and your suit and the tea-things, and oh, everything, ha! ha! ha!" she laughed helplessly.

"You sound sorry."

"It's because I can't stop," her voice sounded tearful in spite of its hilarity, and Adam glared afresh. "I am sorry about it all, still it was a bit your fault too."

He bowed. "It was entirely my fault, madam. Naturally I did it all myself, because I happened to have a sense of humour."

Meg wiped her eyes. "Yes, you are a regular Rochester," she said weakly.

"I am only too delighted to have formed a humorous entertainment. May I ask what time the performance will take place in future?"

"With a view of being present? But I am sorry, I am really. You see it's my birthday to-night, and I shall be awfully old, twenty, and I could never be young again, and so—"

The man of thirty remained unmoved. The excuse sounded feeble in the extreme.

"And I didn't mean to break your tea-things and grab your nose, or anything. It was all an accident. My tea will be just ready, won't you come and take pot-luck with me?"

"I thank you, no."

"Perhaps you think my idea of pot-luck may be peculiar too," she laughed up into his grim face. "There are some jolly scones, and cake and jam. Do come."

"I thank you, no, madam."

"But you will have no tea!"

"I prefer to do without."

"But that's so—so sulky, so childish, of you! And it's Scotch scones, mind! Of course I was to blame a bit myself. Suppose we both apologise to each other?" The idea struck her as excellent.

It did not, however, appeal to him. "Certainly," he replied with laboured sarcasm. "I have the honour to apologise to you, Miss Lister, for using as a mere means of entry and exit to my rooms the stairs which you have reserved as a gymnasium."

"Oh, go away," said Meg, "if you won't be friends! You are in a perfectly beastly temper."

He prepared to ascend the stairs in as dignified fashion as possible.

"I make a bad enemy," went on Meg. "I offered to be friends, but if you won't," his face showed very emphatically that he wouldn't, "I shall probably go in for annoying you a bit."

"Allow me to congratulate you on your success!" Not content with banging his door with an emphasis that shook the buildings, he locked it.

The housekeeper toiled wearily up the stairs and eyed the scene of disaster. "I knew it!" she exclaimed.

"A path of blood and tears," Meg said with a grin, as she began to collect the broken china, and mop up the mess with her handkerchief.

"Fings didn't 'appen like this when the place what was meant for gents, was kept to by gents!"

"It's all right, Sue-Sue, I'll straighten up. Yes, men are messy creatures!"

216 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"Sue-Sue" was known by this name, or anything that rhymed with it, through the ravings of a young artist she had once attended through an illness. His delirious "Sue-Sue" ran continually through the buildings, and the name stuck to the woman, who answered indifferently to it, or Moo-Moo, Ju-Ju, or anything absurd ingenuity could invent.

"Smashed!" she now said.

"I will buy a new set," returned Meg.

The woman looked her up and down. "It's no good, miss," she said, "nothink would ever catch Mr. Beare. If you've come 'ere for a nusbint, you'll 'ave to go empty away like the folk in the Bible."

Meg burst out laughing.

"It's plain seein' the A'mighty was a man, and made it right for His own sex an' no error," grumbled the woman. "I tell you if you get borned woman you are done brown boff ways. You can't get a nusbint an' wish you 'ad; or you get 'im, an' wish you 'adn't! I've 'ad two, both worser'n t'other, an' I knows." And wrapping her shawl more closely round her, the gloomy creature descended to her gloomy, subterranean regions, and seated herself between the two funeral cards on the wall which represented all that was left of the aforesaid two husbands.

CHAPTER XXVII

DOROTHEA IS DISTURBED

"What will Mrs. Grundy say?"—THOMAS MORTON.

MEG was perfectly aware that nobody would approve of her taking up her abode in a haunt sacred to bachelors only, and she waited till she was settled down to let her new address be known. She had been there some time before Dosé could spare an afternoon from Tubbs and domestic matters to see her twin's quarters.

She was very much the matron inspecting the conditions of life of a spinster. She was severe when she learnt the sum expended by her extravagant twin on furnishing.

"But you can't deny it's paid me, that I've got an ideal home?" returned Margaret, and added grandly, "As for money, what is money? Never worth fussing about."

"One has to fuss when it isn't there."

"Oh, I shall just do more for Fairchilds; they are regular Oliver Twists as far as I am concerned. Life's really very simple, and such fun! Now isn't it a nice home?"

"Yes, but just for yourself, and alone! It seems such a waste somehow, and a real home——"

"Means a husband and baby, eh?" grinned Meg, "well, I'd much rather be without, thank you."

Dosé smiled indulgently. She did not believe this statement; to her marriage was the be-all, the end-all, the Mecca of every woman worthy of the name. Unmarried girls made these statements while they "waited." Of course Meg was "waiting" too, if not consciously, unconsciously. When the man came——

Then her face grew troubled. But would he ever come to Callogan Mansions? Would he not rather seek a wife from a sheltered home?

Meg looked at her absent face, and her eyes flashed. "You might give me a little attention when you do see me," she exclaimed in a jealous flash. "After all, I was there a bit before Bruce or Tubbs, though the sun has only risen since they came!"

"Oh, Meg, some day you will understand for yourself!" Then as Dosé looked at her sister, who, sallow, frowning, shabby, was at her worst, apprehension seized her. Would Meg ever know, and if not, what then? What was left? Her breathing was suspended by the tragic idea.

"I don't want to understand," said Meg crossly. "Matrimony makes cabbages of women, it seems to me. I should hate to be a cabbage; I want to be alive."

"A cabbage! Oh, Meg, how can you be so unkind! How can glorious, ideal happiness be cabbage?"

"Pah!" said Meg, and then remembering Adam, hurriedly corrected it to "Pish!"

Dosé began to cry, partly because Meg had hurt her feelings, and partly because at this moment of distress, Bruce's ever-ready arms were absent.

"I'd better go to Bruce," she wept, "he always loves to have me. You are so changed! It's living like this, I suppose."

"It's you that are changed," returned Meg on the verge of tears herself. "Dash husbands and babies!"

"It's only one," cried Dosé weeping violently now.

Meg blew her nose. "What a pity the orphan isn't here," she said with a sniff, "then we could have a regular concert while we were about it!" There was nothing left of the old Dosé; matrimony and domesticity had literally swallowed her up. The sisters, once so close, were now far as the poles apart. It hurt, hurt unbearably.

Then Dosé's plump white arms were round her twin's neck. "It will be all right for you too," she cried with more fervour than conviction, "somebody nice somewhere. I don't say a darling saint like Bruce, because there is only one Bruce in the world, but someone next nicest."

"If any saint comes after me, he gets the boot, and gets it pretty quickly," said Meg savagely. "Saints make me sick! If I thought Bruce was the white angel you do, he'd make me sick too! But he isn't!"

"Oh, Meg, need you be so slangy, so vulgar, so dreadful?"

"Yes, I need!"

"But dear——"

"No man will marry such a hooligan, eh? Don't want him to. If I did, should try to make him whether he wanted to or not."

"Oh, Meg, Meg! You are joking, of course! You wouldn't run after a man, that's—that's simply frightful!"

"Oh no," returned the graceless Meg, "I'd learn the tricks of the trade better than that. I should entice him to run after me, then of course run away, but not so fast that the clever creature did not overtake me!" She laughed rather sardonically.

Dosé was too shocked to answer.

"I'm not going to be dragged away from my career to see to a horrid, selfish man's meals, and look after his horrid children!" persisted Meg, rather annoyed that nobody would take her declarations that she did not wish to marry, seriously.

"Tom was right!" burst out Dosé. "He said you would be bound to deteriorate. He's upset about you. He says you will get like Aunt Luce and the suffragettes she is so thick with. Now Tom is getting on so well he wants his family to do him credit. You know what Madge is."

"So awfully refined," retorted Meg in mincing tones, "like the sugar her grandfather used to sell, refined to the point of being more sand than sugar, I have heard!"

"Oh hush, Meg, and at any rate he's dead, and left a lot of money, and it was a good match for Tom."

"She bought him; imagine buying a Tom for a husband!"

"Who's that?" asked Dosé with sudden interest, for as they stood on the landing Adam came up the stairs towards them. He passed them as if they were not there, and shut himself into his room in his emphatic way.

"Oh, that's the Bear, Rochester," explained Meg, in her loudest, clearest tone. "His name, appropriately enough, is Beare, and he goes through life with a sore head, and no one to throw a single bun!"

"Oh hush, he will hear!"

"He needn't listen," returned Meg also very loudly. "Would he remember he had once said the same thing?"

"Who cares, anyway?"

"Not I!" said a goaded voice from behind the door.

"Meg, come away at once, this is dreadful!" Dosé tried to draw tall Meg back to the sitting-room. "And what is a man doing in your flat?"

"That bit is his."

"But it's the same!" gasped Dosé.

"I make the best of it," said Meg. "Go on listening," she added, "we like it! This is Dosé, my twin, and we've got an orphan too!"

"Meg, oh Meg, come away!" Dosé spoke in gasps. In a few weeks Meg had come to shouting at a man through his keyhole, and sharing her flat with him.

"Imagine me receiving the introduction with due ceremony," said Adam Coneybeare-Ffiffe suavely. "Delighted, I am sure! Are they going to live here too?"

"Of course not! The orphan's at school, and Dosé lives with her husband."

"How charming, for the husband!" said the ironic voice.

"He's hateful, I can hear it in his voice," said Dosé, going suddenly scarlet. "Come away at once, Meg! You must not stay here another day, it is absolutely impossible. I shall send Bruce to see to it!"

"Oh bosh! All right, I'm coming. Now for the rest of the rooms! This is the kitchen, I have to share it with that man, but he keeps out of it, thank goodness. I wish he would keep out of the bathroom too, leaving his sopping towels all over the place!"

"The same bathroom?" asked Dosé in a dazed voice.

"Yes, a bore: but he has his in the morning, I mine at night."

"Oh, Meg!"

"Suppose we had both wanted it at the same time, had to race each morning!"

"This is dreadful, dreadful! And no other woman in the place!"

"There's Sue-Sue who has had the luck to 'bury two,' the housekeeper who lives in the infernal regions."

"You meet——"

"Not often. We bumped once. I said 'sorry,' he growled 'sorry,' and there you are! He was looking for his toothbrush. I didn't know the thing was his and had taken it to clean some silver. He was awfully wild."

Dosé turned very pale. "This must come to an end," she said decidedly. "You girls are so thoughtless, so ignorant of life. You don't realise how easily a woman may get to be spoken lightly of by conduct which, actually harmless enough, is capable of other construction. I am going to Bruce." Bruce was always the remedy.

Arrived at his office, and quite regardless of a grinning boy, she flung herself into her husband's arms, and sobbed on his shoulder.

"Dosé, my darling, my precious! What is it?" He held her close, kissed her, but his face had turned white. "Tubbs? Is she ill?"

"As if that could happen! Shouldn't I die too?"

"Hush, my sweetheart, don't talk of my losing you!" He pressed his lips, which had gone grey, against her damp, pink cheeks. "What is it, beloved, then? Has the maid given notice? Has the washerwoman stolen the clothes?"

He did not know he was being ridiculous, and after all a washerwoman had stolen their clothes, and two maids had given notice!

"Oh no, darling! But Meg is living with a man, a dreadful man!"

"Good God!" exclaimed Bruce, astounded. He thought of his sister-in-law's rather incomprehensible eyes. It did not seem impossible somehow, though unspeakably distressing. "Not a married man?" he asked aghast. No wonder his white-souled Dorothea was upset! He was upset himself.

"Oh, Bruce!" Dosé gave a little scream, clinging to him in horror. "How could you think such a thing, and of Meg, my twin! I meant living in the same flat, and oh, Bruce, she has the same bath!"

Bruce turned a laugh into a cough. "Really!" was all he found to say. He was greatly relieved.

"Yes, really. No wonder you can hardly believe it! No other woman in the place, all bachelors." Her blue eyes were very wide.

"Oh well, bachelors aren't such a bad lot, take them all round," he returned easily.

"But Bruce, to live with! For a girl! And she shouts at him through his keyhole, and he answers back!"

Bruce laughed softly. "Even a bachelor does that now

and then," he said. "He has nobody to bully at home, you know." He kissed his own idolised victim again.

"When Tom finds out, you know what he is."

"Yes, I know what Tom is," answered Bruce grimly. He knew him for an utter cad, snob, and hypocrite; and he had had to suffer at his hands. Tom had had ambitions for his pretty sister, and he considered she was thrown away on an outcast, a beggar and a failure.

"And Madge, you know what she is too?"

"My darling, we have nothing to do with these people."

"But Tom will interfere with Meg, and there will be trouble. They could never get on."

"Then let Tom mind his own business for once!" said Bruce with some heat. He detested his vulgar, purpose-proud brother-in-law.

"But he never does, and anyway Meg must be got away from that dreadful place, and that dreadful man! He had such a cruel, ruthless face. He would stick at nothing."

"You mean he is interested in Meg?"

"Oh no, they hate each other!"

"Hate!" Bruce started slightly.

"Yes, of course hating makes it safe in that way."

Bruce knit his brows. "Couldn't you persuade her?"

"No, she simply wouldn't listen. Bruce, you must go and see about it."

"I!" He had all a man's horror of unpleasantness, of a scene of any description. "Meg won't listen to me if she ignores her own twin."

Dosé began to cry again. "Oh, we aren't as 'twinny' as we were!" she wailed. "And I can't bear it! I don't know what's happened to Meg! She was always very independent, but she's simply rampant now. But it was the man I meant. You must see that dreadful man, Bruce. He must know Meg has you to look after her, you and I and people, that she's not just helpless, alone in the world."

"Meg is never helpless," said Bruce. "She will manage all right. How can I force myself on a strange man? What on earth could I say to him? How introduce the subject of Meg at all?"

"Oh, Bruce, when I ask you!"

"Very well then, dearest," he promised reluctantly.

CHAPTER XXVIII

NEXT BRUCE

“A GENTLEMAN,” announced the housekeeper, who did not always trouble to elaborate in such matters, and shut the door upon the heels of Bruce Daventry.

That embarrassed envoy advanced into Adam's room, and bowed a little awkwardly. “I'm afraid this is rather an unpardonable intrusion,” he said.

So this was the drastic critic, the essayist, whose gifts he had admired often, but whom he had never met in person. Odd that he should turn out to be Dosé's bug-bear! “He looks like his work, his most brutal work,” he thought. “What on earth am I to say? How open the subject?”

Adam had started at the sound of Bruce's low, deep voice, with its curious timbre, and given one lightning glance at his visitor. For a moment dead things stirred; his heart leapt to something akin to humanity, and he remembered old days, old ideals, and a boy's hero-worship. Then he remembered how this man's hands had helped to tear down the beautiful gossamer structure; the rending of the veil that hid the forbidden tree, and the world afire! His face set inexorably.

“Yes?” he said.

“My name is Bruce Daventry,” began Bruce a little helplessly. He could never hold a situation, never deal with it strongly, though Dosé believed him strong in all things; but then she believed him so much that he was not.

“I have heard it.” There was something deliberately cruel in the other's voice. “You edit *The Old Brigade*, and write a little.”

Bruce winced, for there was mockery in the speaker's

224 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

tones, and the sense of failure had never made itself so poignantly felt. This man was well-nigh a master at his art, but a master with no mercy or encouragement for the halting pupil.

"I edit to the best of my ability," he said with a very fine simplicity, "and I write rather badly."

"You are in good company, most do."

"That may be true, though I hope it is not. Few of us have your talent, and not all of us, I thank God, would abuse it so."

Adam gave the laugh that all hated, and shrugged his shoulders. "You mean?"

"You have an abominable gospel, and a terrible ruthlessness. You deny mankind one good gift, he is never just lower than the angels, always on the level of the beasts of the field, and you are maniacal in your denunciations of women. You fling humanity to the gutter, and keep it there."

"If I have known the gutters?"

"Don't we all? Need we see only the garbage, never the stars? But I did not come to talk of writing; I have little right to talk of it, and no right to speak so plainly to you. I came about my sister-in-law who is living here, Miss Lister."

"Your sister-in-law?"

"I am married to her twin."

Adam laughed. "That is very curious," he said.

"It is wonderful," answered Bruce gravely. "My wife does not think her sister should live here. She does not think it suitable."

"I quite agree with your wife. I would be greatly obliged if you would remove this young woman. She annoys me greatly."

Bruce looked relieved. He had feared he knew not what; perhaps the possibility of some attraction between this ruthless realist who had no faith in good or woman's virtue, and Margaret. And he was the type that women lost their heads about. "Then—" he began, and paused abruptly.

Adam seemed to read his thoughts, to have found them amusing, for he laughed sardonically. "Oh, I have not been making love to Miss Lister. I make love to no woman, not even another man's wife." He had, for a moment, the decency to hate himself for this contemptible, cruel gibe.

"He's paid!" he thought. "After all, he's paid."

The painful crimson rushed into Bruce's face. What could this man know of his past? He had shot his gross arrow at a venture and it had gone winging home, burying itself in the wound that would not heal.

"I did not come to hold a court of morals," he said indignantly. "I came, at the wish of my wife, to see after the welfare of our sister."

"Imagining her being persecuted by my attentions! I am not interested in this crude, slangy school-girl, and you would be doing me a great service if you would remove her from my flat."

"Your flat!"

Adam explained impatiently. "Till she came here I existed in peace," he went on, "now there is nothing but unpleasantness. I tried to ignore her, she will not be ignored. I snub her, she won't be snubbed. I let her see what I think of her, and she makes faces at me, calls me impertinent nicknames, and shouts rude things at me through my keyhole."

Bruce struggled with a smile. It was so exactly Margaret!

Adam's face darkened. "I do not find it humorous," he said savagely. "Your sister-in-law is easily the most unpleasing specimen of female hooliganism I have even imagined. For God's sake take her out of this!"

Bruce kept his temper with an effort. "Your attitude is most offensive. And let me tell you this, there is that in the crude school-girl which will startle even you some of these days!"

"She has startled me already!" retorted Adam. "She amuses herself, your coming wonder, in sliding down the bannisters when I am coming up with the tea-tray, and asks me what I get in the way for, when the things are smashed and my clothes ruined! I preferred these chambers before one of Fairchilds' 'finds' made it the scene of her startling exploits."

"Good afternoon," said Bruce curtly, and turned away. He walked across the passage to Margaret's rooms.

Adam's eyes did not follow his departure. He picked up a little china god, and deliberately broke it in pieces. "Oh, the idols of youth!" he said with his bitter smile.

226 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

Meg greeted her brother-in-law with a shamefaced grin. "I know why you've come," she said, "and I heard some of it across the way when you both got angry. It's N. G., old boy, here I am, and here I stay!" She slipped her hand through his arm and looked coaxingly up into his face. "I've got to paddle my own canoe now," she went on, her eyes very bright and wistful, "and shoot the rapids and miss the rocks!" She laughed exultantly.

Bruce shivered slightly, and put his hand on her rough dark mane. "My dear, it isn't so easy to miss the rocks, and only too easy to let the rapids carry you away!"

Meg was instantly sobered. She looked up into his troubled face, next to Dosé's the dearest face in the world, and leaned her head against his arm. "Did they carry you away, old boy?"

"They did," he answered rather tensely. "Oh, Meg, you are so young, so terribly young, and there are so many pitfalls for such as you, and only yourself to save yourself! Remember this always, it is the ideal that matters. Cling to it ever, cling to it closer than a brother! People will say, 'fling it overboard; the ship will be lighter, speed more easily, swifter,' and so it will, my dear, the ballast will be gone, and the speed will be swifter for destruction. And if the worst happens and you have cast it from you, then do not cast yourself after it into the dark waters. Fight on, Meg, ever on, ever upwards, so that at the last the thing that we have lost shall be given back to us!"

She clung to him, her whole being shaken. "How you must have suffered!" she cried brokenly.

"Maybe it is only through suffering we win it back at last, the lost ideal."

"Of course it was a woman? Oh, my poor Bruce!"

"No, a devil!" burst from him.

"Was it long ago?"

"A lifetime ago."

"Then it is all over and done with, and your ship is safe in port after all, but, dear, do you think it wise to let Dosé go on playing at this white-angel business? Should she not understand a little about life and its realities? Should she not know?"

Then as she saw the look of agony, of panic, horror, that crossed his face at the idea, her own changed. "Oh,

Bruce, forgive me! I did not know it was as bad as that!"

"It was worse than anything you could imagine," he said huskily, "even you would shrink from me——"

"No, no, no!" she protested vehemently.

"I tell you, you would. And Dosé, oh my God, Dosé!" He covered his face with his hands.

"She loves you."

"Not the real me. She is too pure to realise what that is. It is easy to be the man she would have me now, but the past cannot be changed. It is my one thankfulness to know that Dosé can never know, Dosé can never guess!"

"Teach her to love you as you are, Bruce, not as she thinks you are."

"Impossible! I tell you Dosé is more to me than God, than life, ay, even than honour! If I lose her love and faith I am done, Meg, done! I should go back to the gutter, to the husks! If you knew what it was to live in hell you would not cast away a hard won heaven. You would only leave it when the angel with the flaming sword barred the way. If she knew, Dosé would never speak to me again, never look at me; instead of love there would be loathing, humiliation, and it would be she that would wield the flaming sword!" His voice died away in a shudder.

There was a long silence.

Then Meg clung to him panic-stricken. "Oh, how can it be as dreadful as that! Not you, Bruce, not you! But if it is, do not let Dosé know, do not let anybody know!"

He pulled himself together. "Nobody shall ever know," he said positively, "and now, my dear, we will talk about the matter that brought me here. I came to speak of you and your affairs, and I stayed to talk of myself, and mine!" He laughed, not very successfully. "Just like a man, eh?"

"At least not like you. Have you come to be a Grundy?" She stroked his sleeve. Bruce was a dear, and she didn't care what he had done, she loved him just the same, more if possible; and anyway, being Bruce, it could not be really dreadful. He only thought it was, because he had such high ideals about everything. Then she burst out laughing. "Oh, you think I will fall in love with that horrible bear, because he is big and strong and grim and handsome, and very 'snubby,' and women are like that! But he would

228 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

never reciprocate, never!" She laughed again. "Why, we loathe each other! What is safer than hatred, Bruce?"

He looked down at her with a white strained face. "Love is safer," he said rather tensely, "infinitely safer, my Meg. Love is the safest thing in the world—when it is love."

Adam, the saint in these matters, cast love to the depths, Bruce, the sinner, raised it aloft! Can it be that sometimes the sinner is better than the saint?

"And when it isn't, when it is just a thing that doesn't matter? With me only the career matters."

"I hope you will have your career, but I hope you will not have only your career, my dear. Don't aspire to sit on the heights alone."

Meg moved restlessly. "Et tu, Bruce! The end of woman, marriage!"

"Or the beginning. I want to think of you loving and beloved, wife and mother as well as artist; perhaps more than artist."

"Ah, that's it, the more! How can one have both equally? And I want the career most. I would rather sacrifice the other to it, than it to the other. I suppose one never does get both?"

"For a woman the law is inexorable," he replied, "and it is a cruel law, but then genius, mind I am not saying you have it, dear, only that one day you may come to have it, is a cruel thing for a woman too, unless she is not much woman. You will be torn in two all your life if you desire both, and there will come the day when you will have to choose between them, and whichever you choose it will seem the wrong choice in the years to come. That which you have let go will be the thing that you will crave for, too late. I wish you had no genius, Meg. I wish you might only have happiness."

"If I might have genius all the rest can go, it shall bring me what I want!" she cried.

He sighed. "I hope so, dear, I hope so. At least you have the world in front, not behind. But now to return to my errand. I find you are the only woman in these Mansions. I do not quite care for that. And you are so young, nineteen!"

"Twenty!" she corrected indignantly. "No longer very young. And if I live with bachelors, aren't I also a

bachelor? You should just see some of the dangerous bachelors! Professory, musty-dusty looking men who stare at me when we meet on the stairs as if I was a 'specimen,' genus unknown. There's rather a jolly party of four young men in the flat below, and we are ever such friends already. There's a Peter Gunter, he's on *The Daily Wire*; awfully jolly getting to know journalists so soon, and sure to be useful. He's a good sort, Peter, though very busy. The other journalist is a Mr. Dealmere, an outside contributor to all sorts of papers. I call him the Wolf because he's always going about seeking what he may devour in the shape of 'copy'; a good sort too, though a bit glum. The youngest of the lot is quite young, twenty-one. I don't know what his name is, because everyone calls him Silly Billy. He is just that. The others say he licks stamps in an office, and licks the wrong side: he certainly is a bit of an idiot; one of the ineffective ones, you know. Then there's Andrew Merriment, I think I like him best. He is in a publisher's office, Bayliss, Jenner and Co. He's only a few years older than me, but simply awfully grave, and serious and responsible. Of course as he is so serious, and his name is Andrew Merriment, he's called the Merry Andrew. Mr. Beare is very annoyed at us being friends; he says we are so noisy. Andrew Merriment is the sort that fishes you out of scrapes."

"Oh, Meg, already!"

Meg grinned. "Well, you know how it always was, the moment I saw a scrape I had to take a header right into the midst of it! One doesn't change in the twinkling of an eye, even when one's twenty!"

Bruce laughed unwillingly. "I see you are determined to gang your ain gait."

"I am, brother o' mine!"

"Talking of brothers, there's Tom."

"But I have disowned Tom, and adopted you! Between Tom and me is the great gulf set. He seeks people for what they have; I for what they are. You cannot find a greater difference than that."

"He is coming to see you about this Callogan Mansions business."

"Let him come! Aren't heredity, and character, and things, rum! Me and Tom! Me with a Mr. Grundy for a

brother! Me with a brother out for the social-climb! Fancy if you were the sort of woman who had to buy a husband, buying Tom! And she paid a good lot for him too! Top price! And you know he's an awful bounder, not even a nice bounder, if there are such things! He ought to have been among the sale-remnants cheap, very cheap. But Madge is almost worse."

Bruce did not contradict the speaker; he agreed too heartily. "I daresay you will be equal to Tom," he said.

"Oh yes, but you will stay to tea? Nobody has stayed to tea yet, and I've got some real dinky little cups, and a real silver, second-hand teapot! You will, won't you?"

He hesitated. At home Dosé would be waiting for her lover, and Tubbs for her playfellow. They would be counting the moments till he came, as he too counted them, longing for reunion as he longed. It was the one golden hour of a long, grey day, for things were not going better with *The Old Brigade*, they were getting worse. In Dosé's presence he could forget this, with her healing touch upon his brow he could forget his longing for the Northland, for the grim, dear, dark face of Daventry, for the stir of the north wind among the trees. With her only this ache was stilled.

But Meg's eyes were so young, so eager, so wistful, and it might be that he could somehow help her a little. His feet were twenty years further on the path of life; surely he could point out some of life's stumbling-blocks, make the way easier for one following after.

So he stayed. And surely that was accounted unto him for righteousness!

CHAPTER XXIX

FINALLY TOM LISTER

COARSE, handsome, flamboyant Tom Lister was, with the addition of brains and ambition, and an even keener eye for the main chance, a second edition of the Reverend Mr. Lister. At school he was sharp and cunning; always the boy to get the best of a bargain of exchange and barter; never the boy to be found out. In this instance, at least, the child was father to the man, and money and success had come of it.

He descended hot-foot upon Margaret, rage in his pompous heart. Wasn't Aunt Luce trial enough for a rising man? Aunt Luce who carried banners in suffragette processions, had her name in the papers, and would probably end in prison! Now there was wild Margaret "on the loose" as he coarsely expressed it, living in a haunt of bachelors who would be only too ready to take advantage of a young, unprotected girl thrust in their midst! Tom judged all men by himself. A nice thing for him if scandal came of Meg's madness! It was all very well to make as much as possible of "the Daventry connection" to his city friends who weren't in the know, but there was Dosé married to a man who might lose his job any day. Then where would they be?

Begging on his doorstep, he supposed. He always foresaw all his relations, most of whom certainly did exist on the verge of penury, begging on his doorstep, dragging him down in their fall, shocking his ultra-refined wife. Madge spoke of his relations with an extra edge to her sharp voice, a little sniff of her sharp nose. All her people were prosperous, almost blatantly so. In their eyes the greatest crime was poverty, and as for scandal, well, scandal was a thing that never dared breathe upon them.

232 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

Meg, Meg was just the sort of girl to make a mess of things. Living like that! Why couldn't she go to rooms where there were other women? Exchanging heaven-knows-what familiarities with her editors!

Tom did not know editors behaved more like condescending gods than flippant satyrs. He only knew how he had behaved.

It was a wet Saturday afternoon when he descended like an over-plump Nemesis upon Callogan Mansions. Meg was lying in a long cane chair with a cigarette between her lips, and scattered about the room in easy attitudes were the four young men she had spoken of to Bruce. Andrew Merriment smoking an old pipe was relating some story which was greeted with a howl of laughter just as Tom entered. It was an absolutely innocent one, but Tom at once felt sure it was very much otherwise. It showed what these men thought of Margaret. It was the beginning of the end. That pretty typist he had had . . . she had been shocked at first, afterwards she had listened even to the worst, her eyes upon his face.

Where was that girl now, one of many? Where Margaret might be if he didn't take care, open her eyes in time.

Outwardly respectable, even godly, the bachelor career of Tom had been far from admirable. Since his marriage he had been absolutely reformed, faithful to his wife, a good father, friend of the vicar, puritanical in many ways. But neither heart nor mind were clean. His puritanism was of the kind that is ever seeking evil or the evil motive, and consequently ever finding it.

Then Margaret looked up, saw his face, and laughed. "Why, it's Mr. Grundy," she said, blowing out a little cloud of smoke. "Git, mes enfants, this is my sainted and respected brother!"

The young men vanished promptly, and Tom shutting the door upon them, came back and looked down upon his sister. "You had no business to leave Dosé," he began. "If a girl can make money, a living, out of her writing-hobby, so much the better, but things must be done decently and in order. There are places for such women, with other women if you must live in town, hostels for working gentlewomen——"

"Women en masse do not amuse me," returned

Margaret lazily. "I prefer this, and as an independent unit I do what I prefer."

"Do you know what it is you prefer?" he thundered. "Do you know what will be the end of it, or don't you care? Are you bad? You have bad eyes, I think."

"Take care," said Margaret quietly.

But Tom had not come to "take care"; he had come to say his coarse say, and he "held the floor" for some ten minutes, and delivered the most of it. He was not "mealy-mouthed" either. Meg had got to be "choked off" this worse than nonsense.

Then Meg rose slowly to her long length, and her eyes were blazing. "Go!" she said briefly. "You have a mind like a sink! I am ashamed for you! If you do not go at once I will ask my friends, clean, honourable men, to throw you out!" She went towards the door.

But Tom did not wait for eviction, he went, rather quickly. The interview had proved short, if not exactly sweet.

"How can women marry such men, live with them?" she thought with a shudder. "It must be a daily degradation. How different from my real brother Bruce. How different from poor Toby!" Toby, a younger brother, lay in a desert-grave.

Tom had to give an account of his interview to his sharp, dominant wife; he edited it very carefully first.

"Disgusting!" said Mrs. Tom. "One really can't know people like that! I daresay she hopes to be asked to my parties, but of course that is quite out of the question, even if she is a relation—by marriage."

Tom was stung; the rich wife could wield the whip. "It makes it awkward with the Daventry connection," he said, "there's Phil coming on and all."

Even Madge hadn't "a peer in the family." Neither had he, as a matter of fact, though he liked to pretend he had, and treated Philip as if he were very close kin, going down to see him, keeping "in" with him, giving him a day in town, a dinner, a theatre. Some day, Philip, eleventh Lord Daventry, would be an asset for social-climbers, and Tom meant to be quick to stake his claim when that day came. Therefore he was prodigal of hospitality to his

234 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

brother-in-law's cousin, whom he alluded graciously to as "my young cousin."

Mrs. Tom only repeated that she really couldn't have his relations, bar the Daventrys, at her house; they were "quite too awful."

CHAPTER XXX

WORK AND PLAY

IF courage, work, and a tireless energy, could assure success, then success was surely Meg's due. She worked early, and she worked late, while others played and others slept. To toil when a dreary fog shut out the world was easy, but it was not so easy when spring and youth called, and the golden daffodils swaying in the laughing wind seemed ever to be calling, "boys and girls come out to play," and to urge the wisdom of spending the treasures of the day that is, instead of hoarding for the morrow that may never come.

"Oh, it's difficult to go on being the deaf adder!" she sighed.

Still if she did not conquer always, she conquered more often than not. She had the work for Fairchilds to do; without that she could not live; that it was drudgery of the most hateful kind must not be allowed to matter. Such drudgery spelt the first rung of the ladder. On the whole her struggle was less than that of many young writers; she could propitiate the wolf, who, if he had the unpleasant habit of calling, had not yet taken to the worse habit of staying.

The girls she met at the tennis club she had joined, the girls Dosé knew, daughters of business and professional men, were always saying how "awfully jolly" it must be. They would stay chatting for hours keeping Margaret from her work. Just at first she did not like to ask them to go and leave her to her task. She knew she would not be able to make them understand what that word meant. When she was driven to speak a little plainly they were offended.

"They're very nice, Merry Andrew," she said to young Merriment a little wearily, "but they do everything but

think. I can't make them realise my work is work, and matters, because I am a woman. They would never dream of interrupting father or brother in their office, but they will loll here for three hours, talk of tennis, frocks, the latest engagement in their circle, the last *matinée* idol, all saying the same thing in the same words till I could scream. There seems no individuality among such women ; when you have known one, you have known the rest ; it is merely a type, and rather a deadly one. I wish they would leave me alone. They think this is sort of play to me, that I am doing it while I wait to get married, upon which I shall immediately and thankfully give it up ! The same cramped, little brain with the same cramped, little thought ! I think it's a pity for a woman, specially for herself, to be over-intelligent, but surely there's a happy medium ! And what's to happen to them all ? They have nothing in themselves for the most part ; they are just waiting to get married ; even those who anybody can see never will get married. Even the men they are ready to marry are too few to go round. Then what of those just going on and on, nothing behind, nothing ahead ? No independence, no occupation, no use. Enough money to live the sheltered life, not enough to live the free and travelled one. Good heavens, Andrew, it's awful to think of ! Oh, twenty times better the battle, even failure, than boredom ! At least there has been the joy of the fight if we lose ; if we win we have made our own place, which is a greater victory than a man can know, for a woman is so horribly hampered by being a woman ! ”

“Hullo, Meg ! What's gone wrong ? ”

“Everything ! Oh, Andrew, I am not getting on at all ! I am just where I was a year ago, and the thought frightens me ! Am I never to make any headway ? You see, I can't fling aside work that pays, for work I can't place, and Fairchilds' stuff is ruining me. Of course I am rather extravagant, I own it ! But money's such a silly trifle to fuss about, and fate has made me a beauty-lover. I hate the cheap and the crude. I like elegant simplicity, and simplicity is the dearest thing of all ! When I'm all woman and no author, I want the money ; when I'm all author and no woman, money is nothing, art all. Oh, it's horrible being two people and having 'em tearing at you

all the time! Isn't the outside fight bad enough, but that there must be the inside fight as well?"

Andrew's grave young face grew graver, then he gripped the girl's hands. "Fight on, Meg, both ways," he said, "it's going to be worth it, I know. The race to the swift, the battle to the strong. It always must come to that in the end in spite of the text."

Her hands closed on his. "Oh, Merry Andrew, you are never merry, but you are always helpful!" she cried gratefully. "Yes, I will be strong. If only one hadn't a body! How delightful to lay it aside now and then, instead of having it always clamouring for something, food, or clothes, or rest!"

Andrew lit his pipe and seriously considered the question, then he said slowly, "I don't know; shouldn't like to miss my grub. There's a lot of joy in a steak and a bottle of Bass; and then there's stretching oneself out in bed and dropping off into that delicious state, half waking, half sleeping, but all rest. Oh, the body is jolly enough!"

"Too jolly, too clamorous," laughed Meg ruefully. "I'm beginning to covet Bond Street clothes and hats to hide its deficiencies, Savoy suppers, luxurious carriages; my box at the opera; all the fleshpots, in fact, and if I'm not careful my sensuous temperament will keep me back."

Meg loved music. She went to the operas with Andrew, and when her ardent emotional temperament was roused to the highest agony of ecstasy, wept with her head on his shoulder, knowing he would understand.

He quite understood. Dear Old Meg was enjoying herself. It was a queer way, even for a "queer" girl, though he felt the music keenly himself. He held the girl to him with a tremulous arm, thankful to remember she did not attend these special operas with other male friends. Somehow the thought of "Old Meg" weeping down another man's neck made him feel both ill and savage.

He did not know there had been a narrow escape of this kind. One of the brothers of her tennis friends, a very correct and well-endowed young gentleman, had begged for her company, and Meg had rather wanted to go. This fortunate young man had his own box, his luxurious brougham, and went to the Savoy for supper. And she had bought an old-rose evening gown which suited her, and

which would not appear contemptible even at the Savoy.

"But I have to cry," she confessed shamefacedly, for when there was no music and she thought of her own conduct in cold blood, it seemed almost abominable.

"I don't mind," said the young man generously, for there was something about Meg different from any girl he knew, and she interested him.

"But I cry on him," owned Meg crimsoning, and he saw it wouldn't do. A man could not risk being made ridiculous. What if she continued to cry on him when the lights went up? No box was private enough for that. It seemed to him there were things no "really nice girl" would do, and that this was one of them. So he took out a damsel who rather disliked music than otherwise and yawned a good deal, but did excellent justice to her supper. After all, bodies are more orthodox than souls!

Once during a haunting melody of passion she had lifted her lips to Andrew's, and he had kissed her. Afterwards she apologised quite abjectly. "It's dreadful," she said half-crying, "and I'm ever so ashamed, and I don't know how it is, for I'm not sentimental, but whenever I hear music like that I want to be engaged or just married and things, you know."

Andrew looked over her head. "Daresay you may be some of these days." He selected a cigarette with great care.

"But probably he won't like music!" lamented Meg.

"Oh, he'll like it all right," said he curtly.

"Yes, two factions within one are a bore," she now said, "but of course the older I get the better it will be."

Here she was wrong; it got a great deal worse. Margaret Lister had as much genius for life and love and enjoyment as she had for art, and the one was always at the throat of the other. Womanhood was worse than girlhood: maturity harder than either. She but stepped to a higher plane, a greater intensity, a more poignant struggle. She seemed to want everything she had not, and nothing which she had.

Always the struggle; seldom the complete victory.

True there were moments, divine, magnificent, when everything was worth while, when the winged words flew to her in roseate flocks, when they trooped out of the dark-

ness gleaming like fire, and she knew what she had done was good indeed, that life was stamped upon her pages ; but such moments were rare ; for the one good page there were the twenty bad.

Extraordinarily good, and extraordinarily bad ! Must it be always so ; would it never come to be only the first, and never the last ? She feared not.

Day by day, month by month, short year by short year, long year by long year, she set herself to bring this thing into subjection ; to be the master, not the slave, and always there came to her, terrifying, insistent, the next generation knocking at the door.

She walked two roads, one in the eyes of all mankind, hand in hand with many companions ; but another road there was, long, dark, full of mystery ; and down that road she went alone.

With all the audacity of youth she started to write of life at twenty ; knowing nothing, surmising all. Shut him away from life, your genius, and life away from him : thrust him into the backwaters and keep him there ; only remember this always, " stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage." It will not matter ; at least it will only matter a little. There is still the voice crying in the wilderness ; in the end it will be heard.

Margaret's genius was crude as yet, but it was there, and it was above money and above price. Money can be lost or stolen, and the price of a man is but for the years of his life ; but the written word, when it is great enough, goes on into other lives.

As yet she was but twenty, and envied of many. She was obviously talented, and obviously lucky. She had dropped straight into a good thing at Fairchilds. She could earn " no end of money " if she liked. She had made a delightful home for herself at Callogan Mansions, and had any amount of friends, specially male friends, for men liked frank, boyish Margaret even if they did not, at this period of her life, fall in love with her.

" Yes, I am lucky, no doubt of that ! " she told Philip Daventry.

" You are so clever, so different," he returned admiringly, " that isn't luck, that's just being you. Oh, I wish I could come and see you sometimes ! I wish I was a man, Meg ! "

Margaret had gone to Lord's for the Eton and Harrow match at Philip's prayer, and was sitting with him on a bench. It was his second term and he was less miserable. "There's Seton now," he said more hopefully, "he's palled up with me, and he's coming to Daventry for half of the holidays. The other half I am to spend with him in town." His eyes sparkled. "His father is a Cabinet Minister, he lives close to the Houses of Parliament. Is that far from Callogan Mansions? I shall come often, it won't be long now. I don't like Daventry, I like London best. Mother never comes to London. She always stays at Daventry. It will be jolly to stay with the Setons. Lord Seton is always busy and Lady Seton too, entertaining for her husband, you know, and Seton is the only child, and shy, and lonely too, though his people are awfully keen on him really, and ever so kind. But they simply haven't time, you know. They are glad for us to be friends. Can I bring him to Callogan Mansions to see you? There he is. Seton, Seton! Come here!"

Seton, a shy, delicate-looking boy, with twinkling eyes, promptly appeared, and was introduced to his friend's heroine. He had heard a lot of Meg and how wonderful she was, and might perhaps be excused for feeling rather disappointed when faced with the reality.

However, he found her "jolly," and promised to come with Philip to Callogan Mansions, and informed her that Daventry and he would take her to the theatre; that they meant "to have some fun, you bet!"

Margaret returned home in good spirits.

"School will be the making of Philip," she thought. "He'll learn to stand up for himself, and he'll need to. Lady Daventry will take some deposing when the day comes!"

CHAPTER XXXI

ADAM IS SORELY TRIED

WHEN Adam met Meg on the stairs, which was oftener than he liked, he tried to pass her as if she didn't exist. When she met him, she tried to enter into conversation with him, disliking to live at enmity with one so close. It grew into a battle of wills. Sometimes he succeeded in slipping past without a word, sometimes she wrung a reply from him.

It aggravated Adam and it amused Meg.

"It would be simply a frightful triumph," she said to Andrew Merriment with dancing eyes, "if I could make him be friends, for he does not want to know me at all!"

"Oh, leave him alone!" growled Andrew.

But that was not Meg's way. She set herself to conquer instead. If she could not win polite replies, she would try for rude ones! Anything was better than nothing. She would goad him into retort, and then prove the sharper-tongued. What fun life was, to be sure!

One day a delightful idea occurred to her. Why, he was the very man to put in a novel! In it he should go whether he liked it or not.

It was too good a joke to be kept to herself. He should share it with her. "I've got such a surprise for you," she beamed. "Oh, you will be proud!"

He made no reply. She stood in such a fashion that he could not pass without pushing her aside.

"It's so exciting. Aren't you curious?"

"Curiosity, madam, is peculiar to your sex."

"Like vanity, eh?" Her eyes were provoking; she considered men vainer than women on the whole, though it was a different sort of vanity. "It's so sweet of you to

call me 'madam' as if you were a shop-walker and I were an important and matronly customer buying things! Would you like me to call you 'sir'? As a matter of fact I have decided to call you Lancelot de Vere. The new serial for *Every Girl's Sweetheart*, you know. Lots of us write books, but few of us are honoured by being put in 'em! Oh, you ought to be proud of being a hero, a hero for *Every Girl's Sweetheart*!"

Her eyes were malicious. "Got him there!" She thought to herself, for he had certainly turned pale.

This was the pillory indeed! Sooner a den of lions! It was difficult to make his voice sound casual, as he said, "The prospect enchants me, naturally!"

"I knew you would be pleased. Yet do you deserve such an honour?"

"Indeed, indeed I do not!" he returned almost feverishly.

"Ah, but we do not get our deserts, fortunately, do we? Some have greatness thrust upon them, you know! You see, Lancelot de Vere will be the ideal hero of *Every Girl's Sweetheart*, a Rochesterry sort of person, silent, strong man, very popular just now. There I will describe you to the illustrator so that you will be the man on the cover embracing the girl, or kneeling at her feet. Won't that be jolly?"

Adam was dumfounded. Would this terrible girl really go to such lengths? Her eyes looked like it; she had eyes that looked like anything, confound her!

"Honoured, I am sure!" he said with stiff lips.

"You won't mind being frightfully sentimental, rather sloppy, will you? Because it has to be like that, and lots of it! You may have to kiss the heroine's sacred feet, or the mat she wipes 'em on, and 'be rent with the tearing sobs of a strong man's agony' when she refuses you, and talk with a breaking voice of your dear old mother——"

She paused. She had got home at last! The man was livid, and his eyes were burning with hatred. He had thrust his clenched fists in his pockets. He wanted to strike her. Well, she was beginning to hate him just as much, and it served him entirely right. Why couldn't he be friendly and civil as she wished?

You will fall at the feet of the 'only woman you have

ever loved,' it's always got to be the 'only woman' with Fairchilds, and say——

"Damn!" shouted Adam losing his self-control suddenly. "Oh damn! damn! damn!"

Meg was delighted. She had roused him out of his ironic calm at last! "Oh no," she answered, affecting to be deeply shocked, "it's only the villain who talks like that, and then he must not say more than 'Dash!' We are very particular."

"You make me sick, sick!"

"Then you must not mention it. Fairchilds cannot tolerate vulgarity. I assure you we are nothing if not refined. Our readers are 'refined young ladies.'"

"I will not be the hero!" he snarled savagely, like some baited, helpless animal, for how was he to prevent any cruelty this woman chose to inflict upon him? Hateful, horrible, vulgar hooligan! Hateful, magnetic eyes!

"You will not be able to help yourself, Rochester."

"Nobody will recognise me. Just some absurd caricature. Well, it does not matter."

"You will even recognise yourself, and I will prove it. I will 'draw' you and show you the result."

He made no answer, save to shut himself into his own room. He had half a mind to leave the only cheap and comfortable rooms he knew, the only "home" he had, but he could not make it a whole mind.

"No, she shall go, not I!" And his eyes gleamed. If he could not always ignore this girl he could fight her, and of course he could win. A young ignorant thing, ten years his junior! It should be easy. Undoubtedly she should be the one to go if it came to that.

Meanwhile Meg was writing her "study" and chuckling as she wrote. It was good! It was the Bear on paper! How he looked and walked! What he said, and why; the things he thought, she knew he thought them. It was cruel, but it was good.

A few days later she lay in wait for him outside her open door, and held out a bundle of typed sheets. "Know thyself, oh Bear!" she said.

Curiosity, the vice of the other sex, made him take them into his room to read. His face grew very bitter. The

analysis was a masterly and ruthless dissection. It was not pretty, but it was true.

"God help me, it's me," he said, "me stripped to the bone!" The wretched girl had talent; rather awful talent. "Damn her!" he added. "Damn her!"

The wretched girl chose that moment to tap imperiously at his door. "Let me into the lion's den, Rochester," she said softly, "you never know, I may be bringing you a bun!"

He did not let her in. He brought out the manuscript instead and thrust it into her hands.

She looked at the fire. "I had not expected to see it again," she remarked.

"Once I happened to be a gentleman."

"Was it a very long time ago, Rochester?" Her voice had softened, and Meg had rather an engaging voice.

"It was a lifetime ago, and another life," he returned roughly, "but because I did not burn other people's possessions then, I cannot burn them now."

She laughed. "You must want to! So it was you, after all?"

"You have talent, of a sort. Mark to what end you use it."

"Not in castigating bears, however much they deserve it? You said I couldn't, so I had to show you I could."

"You have shown me that you can crucify; but that is not enough. There are two sides to every picture; you have shown but the one, the worst."

"Have you any other?"

"All humanity has another."

"But all do not guard it, conceal it as skilfully as you. You need not be afraid. I knew it was cruel, I meant it to be cruel, but I was not going to use it." She rained white fragments upon his feet. "I had to show you. You would deny me any virtue at all, any talent, any life, because I am young and a woman!" Her great eyes blazed at him, and there were tears behind them.

He shut the door in her face. It was all the answer he had for Margaret Lister, and her passionate vibrant youth.

CHAPTER XXXII

A CATASTROPHE

THE four young men who had become so very friendly with Margaret had their bedrooms under her flat, but their sitting-room was on the ground floor. They were waiting there one night for Margaret to return from a mission she had undertaken on behalf of Miss Burney, who was in bed with one of her bad, sick headaches. Andrew Merriment was pacing up and down, pausing every now and then to look at the clock.

"It's sickening the way Meg gets taken advantage of!" he burst out angrily. "She was writing till late last night, and was up early this morning to finish, and hoping for a rest this afternoon, when that woman throws herself, and her job, on Meg's mercy, and off Meg goes to write up that workhouse affair at a place three miles from a station, with a rotten train connection. Ten to one she had to walk both ways. It's pouring and she won't get back till one! It's not good enough. Well, I'll be off!" He hurriedly departed.

The youth known as Silly Billy opened his mouth very wide. "What's the hurry?" he asked the others, "he'll be ages too early. He never used to be like this, so fussy and that! Only since Meg's come. He's seemed different. Why?"

"Clever devil, in your spare time, ain't you?" asked Peter Gunter lazily.

Dealmere, whom Margaret aptly termed the Wolf, looked up with glum interest in his long, lean, hungry face. "It's a pity," he frowned, "he won't be in a position for years yet, and then it will be somebody else for both of them, and all this soul-harrowing and so on wasted and for nothing."

246 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

The Silly Billy giggled. "There 're girls you like and girls you get 'gone' on," he remarked, "and Meg's the kind you like and chum up with and that, so it's all rot talkin' like that of the Merry Andrew and I don't believe a word of it!"

He was told to keep his silly opinion to himself, and time passed while they discussed this and other matters and watched the clock.

Meanwhile Meg, silent, and most utterly weary, was returning home under Andrew's escort. She had had to walk each of the three miles, and though it had been a lovely day when she started, it had rained most of the way going and all the way back. She had put on a new coat and skirt she could not really afford to buy, let alone spoil, and a pair of smart, thin, rather tight shoes. Her clothes were ruined, her shoes hurt, and she was soaked to the skin and shivering. She had no words for Andrew; no thought for anything save warm bed and hot bath. Before leaving she had lit her bedroom fire and stacked it with damped slack in such fashion that it would last till her return. She had left milk ready to boil in a saucepan, as she always drank a hot glass on getting into bed, and her nightdress airing on the guard.

As she dragged one weary, painful, cramped foot after the other, it was comforting to think of firelit room, and the sleep of which she had gone so short lately.

She shivered as the door of the Mansions clanged to behind her, and the young men coming out of their room commiserated her wretched plight.

She tried to make a joke of it as she mounted the stairs, the others following. "I believe I shall have some whisky in my milk to-night," she said, "and go to bed in a state of glorious, if beastly, intoxication! How I wish my sainted brother could see me! I believe I shall sleep the clock round and just let Fairchilds rip!"

"You just do, and more than the clock round!" advised Andrew paternally. "What's that?"

"What?" asked Margaret wearily, while the young men all began to sniff and look anxious.

"Don't you smell anything? Something burning?"

"No," said Margaret listlessly, "do you? Where?"

The young men looked at each other with alarmed

faces. "Upstairs," blurted out the Silly Billy, "in your quarters."

Margaret uttered a cry, and in spite of her weariness flew up the stairs. She began to smell something, and the nearer she got to her own quarters the more plainly she smelt it. She flung open her bedroom door, the young men crowding on her heels, and a great wave of smoke poured out at them, while bright little flames ran round the mantelpiece.

Andrew pushed past Meg, the others followed, and in ten minutes the fire was got out, but what a ruin was left behind! A blackened room, soaked bed, chaos, disorder, dirt!

The shivering girl dropped limply into a chair and began to cry. This was what she had come back to! A red-hot cinder had flown out, caught her nightdress, spread conflagration all round. The bedclothes were black and sopping, the carpet aswim, smoke and singeing everywhere! She might as well hope for heaven as any bed or rest that night, and her limbs were aching so that she could hardly stand, her head hot and burning, her teeth chattering.

Andrew was very distressed, the others scarcely less so. Meg of all people in tears! What was to be done? Andrew suggested she should go and sleep in his room, but she only shook her head. "It doesn't matter, nothing matters now," she sobbed, "oh, everything is spoiled, everything!"

"Damn Miss Burney!" growled Andrew. "If people would attend to their own jobs this wouldn't have happened. We must get things straight somehow." He looked helplessly round. It seemed impossible to believe that a week's work would make the room habitable again. What to do! Where to start!

"I'll get Sue-Sue," he said.

The Silly Billy giggled at him. "Sue-Sue will be in bed."

"I don't care," said Andrew desperately, "she'll have to come if I pull her out of it." He disappeared.

A little later he was back. "She's coming," he said briefly. "Buck up, Meg, old girl, she'll know what to do to get the place to rights. There she is!"

And indeed there was a sound of slipper-slopper, flippoty-flop, outside. Sue-Sue entered, rather dramatically, there was a startled gasp from those present, while

all looked hurriedly elsewhere. Margaret did not look up at all. She was crying now because she could not stop. Therefore she missed the sight of the housekeeper in an old short nightshirt, a legacy from husband number two, with cloth shoes that had once graced the vast feet of policeman 978, husband number one, and shawl inadequately draped round a strangely denuded-looking head.

"I knew it!" said this apparition, gazing around her, "when a place what was meant for gents was kept to by gents, houses didn't get afire in the middle of the night burnin' innercent folk alive in their bids! I said to Mrs. Simms——"

"Never mind Mrs. Simms," broke in Andrew, "we want you to help us get the place to rights. Miss Lister is worn out."

"What did she go for to set light to it then, while innercent folk——"

"It's all wet and black, we want you to make it——"

But Sue-Sue had come out of curiosity, not to work. "I'm a gallus slave, I knows that well, Mr. Merriman; widows, even widows of two bein' made to be put on by your sext, but my hours are from mornin' to night, an' wearin' enough, God knows, but not all night too, an' I wish you good-evenin', Mr. Merriman, and the young lady too." She used the word "lady" with sardonic emphasis. "She's fond of 'er pranks to be sure. We must all be thankful it wer 'er own bed she 'ad a fancy for burnin'." And her flippoty-flop, slipper-slopper, died away and was heard no more.

"Talk of callous slaves——" began Peter Gunter with a grin.

"Oh, chuck that now!" commanded Andrew briefly, "something's got to be done, and we must do it."

"But what, and where, and how?" asked the others helplessly.

At that moment a door on the other side of the passage opened, and Adam charged irately out of his room. "I won't have you pillow-fighting in the middle of the night!" he exploded. "I haven't got a wink for the noise you've been kicking up. Hullo! Good heavens!"

"Pillow-fighting!" echoed Andrew, his face crimson,

"if you can think not like that you might keep it to yourself! Can't you see? Didn't you smell burning?"

Meg lifted her head and stared. She brushed her hand across her eyes and looked at the intruder with interest. What a ragged dressing-gown! How much younger and nicer and more human the Bear looked with his hair rumpled up! Were her eyes very red? He should not suspect what a baby she could be. She would die rather than shed a tear before him, but could she command her voice?

"Everything is simply ruined," wailed the Silly Billy. "Were you insured?"

It was almost the last straw, for of course she was not insured, and equally of course, she was extra short of money. Her expensive clothes were already spoiled.

She tried to force her trembling lips to a "no," and blinked very hard to keep the tears out of her eyes.

"Just like a woman!" muttered Adam impatiently. He contemplated the soaking wreck in outdoor clothes, noted signs she hoped he would not see. She stared back at him bravely enough. "Oh, I did it just to annoy you," she said, but her voice was not quite under her own control.

He remembered her errand, for Andrew had mentioned it to him with some indignation, and surmised much that was not put into words. He was angry with her for disturbing him, angry with her for making him feel sorry for her wretched plight, and his voice had never been rougher or harsher when he turned to her. "Get along into a hot bath," he commanded briefly, "and stay there for a bit, it will do you no harm. In the meanwhile we can dry the place at least," and he sent Gunter to light the gas stove in the kitchen. "I suppose you have fresh bedclothes somewhere?"

"In the attic."

"Very well, we will see to all that. Your dressing-gown is behind the door and dry, and I suppose you have a night-dress somewhere. Your towels are all wet, but there's a dry one in my room if you will call in for it."

Margaret found herself obeying, and glad to obey. She lay thankfully in the hot water and gradually the ache came out of her bones, and she felt no longer miserable, only very sleepy.

She was flushed with warmth when at length she went back to her own room to find that the miracle had indeed been accomplished, for under Adam's curt directions the young men had worked with a will. Andrew wondered how this grim man knew exactly what to do, and the best way to do it. Had his life at sea taught him so much?

Meg came back to a fire, dry bedclothes, and a less damp carpet, which was now covered with a rug. "It is wonderful!" she gasped, and looked gratefully at Adam.

"It's merely common-sense," he growled. He glanced quickly at Meg, and then quickly away again. The usually sallow girl had a rosy flush, the hair she wore strained off her face in most unbecoming fashion waved softly round her forehead in its loosened state, her exquisite white throat was bare, and her eyes shining. She looked extraordinarily attractive, almost beautiful. In Adam's eyes this was the unforgiveable sin.

The young men left the room with a brief "good night."

Adam thrust a glass of hot milk into the girl's hands and turned to go. "Drink that when you get into bed," he said gruffly.

"Rum punch! How divine! Oh, Bear, fancy you being so nice and kind!" She looked at him with very bright eyes.

"Pray fancy nothing of the sort! I merely wanted to get to sleep as soon as possible. This was the quickest way."

"Oh, Mr. Beare, you have been kind, dreadfully kind! I—I am ever so grateful, thanks awfully. I won't call you horrid names again. You're not horrid after all."

"First impressions, madam, are always correct."

"But second thoughts are best," she answered softly.

He turned to the door, and she turned too; she took a piece of his dressing-gown between fingers and thumb. "Will you let me mend this for you to-morrow?" she implored.

He twitched it angrily out of her grasp. "I thank you, no!" he said emphatically, and left the room.

"I shouldn't wonder if we made friends after all," thought Meg as she slipped into sound, delicious sleep.

"Now I've seen him with his hair all rumpy, and no collar,

and that frightful ragged thing, he can't be so freezing surely!"

But if it was possible for Adam Beare to be grimmer, he was grimmer than ever, and certainly very far from "making friends."

"He was frightfully decent, wasn't he?" she said to Andrew, "but it's horrid to show me he regrets being so."

"Oh, confound Beare!" said Andrew, his face darkening; "why not ignore the fellow's existence?"

"There are people you can't ignore somehow," answered Meg. "I shall have to go on hating him just the same, it seems."

CHAPTER XXXIII

MISS LISTER IS NOT ALTOGETHER PLEASED

MISS LUCY LISTER had been away for a long holiday during her niece's move, and very busy on her return, so that it was some time before she could get round and see Meg. At last she arrived on a visit of inspection, and, coming panting and blowing up the stairs, met Adam half-way.

He stood aside for her to pass. There was only just room. He was a big, powerful man, she was an exceedingly stout lady.

She gave him a brusque little nod, and eyed him curiously. It seemed to her that she had seen him somewhere before, or else it was that he reminded her of somebody.

"Now young man," she said pleasantly, "there's room for two, even of our size, if you give me my share."

"I beg your pardon!" He squeezed himself into the smallest possible space.

Her small, deep-set eyes twinkled. "Come, come, I'm not as fat as all that, whatever my friends say! Excuse me, but do you know you remind me of someone?"

His face darkened. "I have never met you before to my knowledge," he said curtly.

"What's he done, I wonder?" was the first, and uncharitable, thought of Miss Lister; the second, "What does he dread?"

His eyes, falling on her badge of vivid suffragette colours, with its ubiquitous motto, narrowed with disgust.

Miss Lister laughed pleasantly. "An enemy, I see."

He did not reply and Miss Lister was annoyed with his silence; so much seemed to lie behind it.

"An eloquent, a very eloquent silence, I think?" she said

He bowed, but again he said nothing.

There was about to be a very large demonstration, and Miss Lister desired to convert Meg. Dosé was of course no use. Meg would probably think wrong, but women like Dosé did not think at all. They only used silly platitudes, knew nothing of what they spoke, and were incapable of interest or understanding. Meg would at least go into the subject before she decided one way or the other, and know what she was talking about.

"Can you tell me if my niece, Margaret Lister, lives on the next floor?"

"Is Miss Lister your niece?" he asked quickly. Possibly this was the woman who used to stay with her brother at Daventry Vicarage, but there was no reason why she should recognise him. He certainly would not have known her. "The world is really disconcertingly small!" he thought, irritated.

Aloud he said, "You will find her on the next floor, on the right side of the passage."

"There is some awful, objectionable brute on the left, I understand?"

"There is me."

She started slightly, flushed a little. "Oh, really! May I ask your name?"

"Adam Beare."

"The critic and essayist! How interesting! I cannot tell you, Mr. Beare, how I have admired your work!"

"Pray do not try."

She bit her lip and spoke a little sharply. "I suppose you don't happen to know if Margaret is in?"

"I heard her type-writer just now. One seldom hears anything else. Women have no sense of proportion, it's always all work or all play."

"Fairchilds think very highly of my niece and her talents!"

"Pah! Fairchilds! I hope she is not as bad as all that!"

Miss Lister lost her temper. "You seem very interested in my niece!" she snapped.

"Then appearances are deceptive. I am not interested even in well-dressed, well-mannered, attractive women, let alone in plain, crude, slangy school-girls." He had a

sudden vision of Margaret the night of the fire. Plain? Well perhaps not, but still the crude, impulsive school-girl.

Miss Lister chuckled. "Indeed! More god than man, saint than sinner! I expect you will be interested some day; I have known such things happen to a man, even at thirty and over," she had judged him thirty; "it will possibly be a slangy school-girl, and rather humorous!"

She did not wait for an answer but proceeded laboriously up the stairs, and descended upon Meg with an astonishing question.

"Is your fellow-flattist in love with you?" she asked.

Meg's mouth fell open, and she stared at her aunt. "What, who do you mean? The fat man in a light suit?"

"He isn't fat. He's a big, striking, handsome man. I met him on the stairs just now. I wish I could remember where I've seen his face before. Probably somewhere where it did him no credit."

"Then, Aunt Luce, you must have been doing yourself discredit too!"

"Tut! Tut! Meg, I'm not strait-laced, but I don't think I quite care for this. Here you are, a girl of twenty, practically sharing your flat with a dangerous-looking man in love with you."

"The Bear! In love!" gasped Meg when she could speak for laughing. "Oh, Aunt Luce, what an imagination, even for a novelette-writer! Why, he won't even let me know him, and I've tried ever so hard. He'd be jolly useful, he's 'A. B.' you know."

"Then if he isn't interested in you why did he repudiate the suggestion so ferociously?"

"You suggested it! Oh, how could you?"

"Well, he made me angry, and it just slipped out," but the speaker had the grace to look, and feel, a little ashamed.

"He makes everybody angry! You are quite too impulsive for an aunt. Why, even I often think before I speak! As for tolerating me! You should see the way he laughs at me, like a bark and an east wind combined. He thinks I'm a regular hooligan, and even plainer than I am!"

"You are sure?"

"Positive! But he's not very logical, he tries to make me feel a raw school-girl, and then speaks to me freezingly

as 'madam,' which makes me feel rather dignified and important. I believe he would almost forgive me my existence if he could make me afraid of him, or awe me a bit. But bother the Bear! Isn't my flat a duck? You'll stay and have tea? Real silver service, the darlinigest cups."

"Oh, Meg, you have been dreadfully extravagant. How much have you in the bank?"

"Rude woman! What a question to ask one's hostess. Well, about ten bob or so. Anyway it is a balance and I can talk truthfully about it. It doesn't matter, nothing matters, everything is too much fun. I daresay I shall make quite a pot before long. I've got some really decent stuff out just now. After all, even editors can't keep their eyes shut for ever. Something is bound to turn up trumps."

"Umph!" said Miss Lister, who had gone through the same thing and never seen trumps turn up. "Only bitter experience will teach you, it seems. But I came about Thursday's demonstration. The writers are to march."

"Aunt Luce, I won't be dragged in! There are many reasons, one will suffice. I am too selfish, too ambitious. I admire the sacrifice of many of your workers, though the methods of the militant section seem really too awful. There are good women, noble women in the thing, I know all that, fanatics too, alas! I am not good nor noble nor fanatic. I have only one Cause, my own career. I will not be among the 'leading' mediocrities. I'm going for the very first flight of the great novelists. I may fail: at least it will be that or nothing."

"Oh, the dreams of youth, the idle vanities of fame!" exclaimed Miss Lister impatiently. "To think I had them myself once! It's just a phase of youth, and happily it will pass. I am fifty and I still write penny novelettes, and am glad to get the chance!"

"But you wouldn't be writing penny novelettes if you had had it in you to be a great novelist," said the crude niece brutally, "that would be impossible, Aunt Luce. Such writing——"

"Yours as well as mine, Miss High-and-Mighty," cried the angry aunt. "Let me tell you this; it's better to do the thing you can well, than the thing you can't, badly. So you

look down upon it, do you? You were glad enough to get it accepted and paid for."

"One has to boil the pot; if only it would boil over now and then!"

"I suppose you do it with your eyes shut, Miss Superiority?"

"Yes, aunt," said niece meekly, and truthfully.

"That I can quite understand!" The speaker gave an angry snort. "As the editress of *Every Girl's Sweetheart* I have had to complain of repetition. Do you know the last tale I sent back was the same with a different title, in plot and wording, as one I published from you a year ago? Do you know that that sort of thing is rankly dishonest, and will ruin you if you do not take care? If the labourer is worthy of his hire, must he not see to it that his labour is worthy of payment? Is yours?"

Meg hung her head, flushing guiltily. "I was horribly shocked and upset about that," she owned. "I know it was too careless for words! It must look like deliberate dishonesty. I had no idea till you sent it back and I compared it with the tale you mentioned. Then of course I saw and nearly died! I write absolutely mechanically, hardly thinking at all. Oh, aunt, suppose it had been published! I could never have explained! Nobody would have believed that because I was thinking of my novel I never thought of that! I should have felt as if I ought to be in prison. I am careful in that way now at least, I have a book with all the plots I have used crossed off. It won't happen again! This sort of writing is only a stepping-stone, a temporary prop. It takes so much time, spoils my hand for big work."

"There you go again, Miss Inflation! So you are going to be famous some day?"

Meg nodded confidently. She had no doubt whatsoever. Success must come; she believed it inevitable. It might come soon, if she was very lucky, or it might come late, as some of the most permanent successes had done, but come it must. She had no vision of it coming too late. She had not yet discarded the rose-coloured spectacles of youth. Her eyes widened, dilated, looked into the glorious, certain future. It would be upon her any time now; to-day, to-morrow!

Miss Lister, intensely irritated, felt for her cigarette-case, and looked past the shining eyes. "Is it genius I see before me?" She laughed incredulously.

A little red stole into Margaret's sallow cheeks. "Relations are always like that," she said, turning away, "the last to see the truth, always unwilling to believe it. 'Shall any good come out of Israel?' Shall one of my own blood have greatness, seeing that I am myself so small? Shall a mere relation excel? Oh, perish the thought!"

She thought of Madge, of Tom, of others, and laughed wryly.

"Don't be absurd, child!"

"Absurd! Yes, it's absurd to have these talon fingers tearing at me, rending me! Talent, mediocrity, comes quickly and easily to the front for its little day; genius does not come quickly or easily, but it stays there when it arrives!"

"It'll never arrive for you," said her aunt pityingly, "poor child, we all have to learn the same lesson—some early, they are the fortunate ones, some late: too late. We are all crowing cockerels in the April of our days! It is for us to wake the sun, to send him to bed; we are going to be the one cock that counts, master of our world, the farmyard. But all the time Fate, in the shape of the farmer's wife, has destined us for the pot, not for the head of even the smallest pen! It's just youth a little drunk! You can see it in a farmyard or in a drawing-room; it's the same seed."

She struck a match violently. She wanted to save Meg from making a great mistake, from casting away the bird in the hand for a problematical two in the bush.

"Then it's good to be drunk!" said Meg drawing a long breath.

Miss Lister lit her cigarette. "Ay, it's good," she returned curtly, "but the gay part of the intoxication does not last very long, and there's always the morning after to come. A chit like you! Aren't you content to be so well in it with Fairchilds? To have money waiting for you just to pick up, and to pick up easily? There's many a woman double your age envies you. I'm not sure that I don't envy you myself. And you want to fling your goods and chattels in the river for a sunset, an illusion."

"It can't be all illusion," answered Meg, "because nothing, not even love, is that."

Miss Lister gasped. "So you are going to give me a treatise on love now, miss! Good Lord!"

"I don't know anything about love, I only write about it. I haven't time if I wanted to, which I don't. A thing that is here to-day and gone to-morrow, and both come and gone without rhyme or reason."

Miss Lister took her cigarette out of her mouth. "Now the worldly, cynical, philosophical touch, crudely expressed. Go on, Miss Wisdom! You have got a colossal impudence, and that's an asset which will bring you through quicker even than talent. Go on. I'm not too old to learn at fifty from twenty."

"I didn't mean to—to——" stammered Meg a little sulkily.

"My dear, you were merely yourself. So you are making tracks for the laurel leaves? That's the plain English of all this, is it?"

"I have entered the battle and I will leave it dead or victorious," answered the girl grimly, setting her mouth.

Her aunt eyed the dogged young face. "Well, you look as if you mean it, but meaning and doing.—Never mind that. What of Fairchilds? Where do they come in?"

"They don't come in."

"But you do, into the workhouse. What of your bread-and-butter? Is that nothing? You've got a hearty appetite as I happen to know. Wait till you can't pay the rent."

Meg wasn't to have long to wait; but Miss Lister did not know she was uttering a prophecy.

Meg shrugged her shoulders.

"Think of the authors Fairchilds have helped to make," went on Miss Lister.

"If you call it making, I call it breaking. What do they insist on from these authors? Something to a recognised plan. Originality or art is of the devil, out with them! Something cheap and sensational, 'safe and pretty'; nothing to make one think, or feel uncomfortable. Always the chocolate box article; never the bitter fruits of life. Make your art the gift of mediocrity to mediocrity, write for the millions, mostly fools, and

remember the approval of the cultured and the few will never pay you. If you suspect yourself of genius, crush it, damn it, deny it ! It will stand in your way to wealth. Be the slave of the public, dare not hope to become its master ! For the slave wages and gracious applause if his antics please ; for the master, what ? A monument when he is dead. In life they drive him to hunger ; in death they rise up and call him wonderful. He asked for bread ; they give him a stone."

"Oh, good gracious me, if she isn't off again ! " gasped Miss Lister helplessly. "What a thing of words it is !"

But Meg had got into her stride ; she was no more than started. Her cheeks were flaming, her eyes like two burning fires in her face. She had had to bottle the thing up too long. No one would take her seriously ; she would make even Aunt Luce see a little of what it all meant to her, if she had to say things she would afterwards regret. Poor Aunt Luce who could not see very much, or deep, or far, because the fires were long since dead, and she was fifty !

The child isn't so plain, thought the aunt, surprised. She has possibilities, distinct possibilities. How odd if she should be attractive in a year or two ! I wish she was married. She's fire and tow in one. "Well never mind, child," she said soothingly, aloud, "I quite understand of course, and it's all very interesting, I'm sure, but isn't it close on tea-time ?"

Meg took no notice ; her hands were clenched. "I am to cultivate my erratic patch into the neat gardens of villa-dom. As a villa, detached or otherwise, I am a success with my stucco walls and bright paint. I prefer not to be a villa-success but to fail in my own way. Walk the same road in the same way as the rest, no, by God, I won't !"

"Your egotism is appalling, that's what's the matter with you, egotism run riot ! Have you anything more to say ?"

"Lots."

"Middle-age means the art of listening to our juniors ! If I endure for once, will you let me off next time ?"

"I don't know till next time comes. I shall write till at last there is a book I can feel nearly satisfied with."

"If you are not satisfied, and the publishers even less so, then I presume you will take in washing for a living. You will probably wash even worse than you write, and Fairchilds will have got another or others to fill your place. I wish you were the kind of girl that gets married. You would be safer married, Meg."

"Who wants to be safe?" asked the girl scornfully. "Of all the boring ideas!"

"Everybody, when they get to that age that is just too late."

"I am going for the career and the career only. Men are never worth the sacrifice marriage entails; household worries, lack of freedom or time, the risk of your health, perhaps your life. Oh, it isn't good enough. I tell you it doesn't even tempt me. I haven't seen a man that I ever think twice about, and don't expect to either! No, the laurel leaves are ever so much more fun."

"Then when may we hope to see you setting the Thames on fire, or your own little pet puddle?"

"Own little pet puddle!" echoed Meg. "Oh, what a delicious phrase! So you don't think much of the artistic temperament, with or without the art?"

Miss Lister snorted impatiently. "I prefer not to think of it at all. Temperament is made the excuse for everything nowadays. I have always been a commonsense woman, thank goodness. We are the sort to live with; the others may be interesting to discuss, fascinating to talk to, but they are perfectly intolerable to live with. Now don't imagine you've got it, child!"

"I don't need to. People that have it certainly oughtn't to be cursed with relations. You have decided that I am not a genius. So be it. Shall we leave it at that, and to time?"

"The kettle, like yourself, has been boiling over, and making a deal of spluttering this long time past," said Miss Lister pointedly, "and I thought I was asked to tea. Was I mistaken?"

"I'm awfully sorry, and you're a decent old bird, aunt, after all!"

"You think that the correct term for your editress and fifty-year-old aunt?" laughed Miss Lister.

"When it's meant as I meant it," returned Margaret, attending to the kettle.

CHAPTER XXXIV

SOME CRUDE REALITIES

“WHY should horrid looking men walk up here, and try and shove advertisements into my hands?” demanded Meg indignantly of her four friends. “I wouldn’t just take them, and shut him out, and now there he’s lurking round the place again, that man with the paper-thing.”

The four young men leaned out of the window, and eyed the stranger with disfavour, then Dealmere spoke in his gloomy fashion. “A writ,” he said.

“What’s that?” asked Meg interested. She was always eager to learn, and she learned a good deal one way and another during her life, some of it by bitter experience.

They explained briefly. “It was awfully clever of you not to let him serve it on you!” said Andrew admiringly.

“He’s after my hard-earned money? Oh, what an abominable man!”

“Possibly an admirable husband and father,” grinned Gunter, “but in the execution of his duty a roaring lion. You had better gum yourself to the house, and keep your doors locked——”

But he spoke too late. “Miss Margaret Lister, I believe?” said a suave voice, and the writ was served.

“What happens next?” demanded Meg.

“You pay or get summoned, or——”

“Five pounds,” sighed Margaret, “it’s that silly old grocer round the corner, sand and tea-leaf sweepings and stuff. Lots of blue things have been lying about lately and I put ‘em all in the fire to save litter. Lucky Fairchilds have just paid up. They must have it, I suppose, though I had an idea there were a few other places it was due at; however, sufficient for the day——”

The account was settled and Margaret thought no more of

the affair. It wasn't exactly "fun" of course, but after all it was one of life's minor disagreeables, and she knew something she had not known before, that a writ can be kept outside for some time with due precaution. She was far too busy to think of anything but her work just then, till another disaster threatened.

Into this, greatly to his disgust, she dragged Adam Coneybeare-Ffiffe.

She caught him in the hall and clung to his coat. There was sheer panic in her dilated eyes. Where was the masterful independent "bachelor girl"?

"Oh come, and turn him out quick!" she implored.

Adam disengaged himself, coldly and decidedly. "To whom or to what do you allude?" he snapped. "I'm in a hurry, Miss Lister."

"The man that's come to live with me." She shuddered.

"I'm afraid I am rather dense."

Her long nervous hands fastened on his coat again, and she thanked heaven for his strength and inches. "To live with me, for always," she wailed, "he says it's law."

Adam shook her off violently, turning on her with such a flame in his eyes that she caught her breath aghast, shrinking a little. "So you've been masquerading all this time! Like your twin sister, you also have a husband, but unlike her, you do not comfort him in sickness and in health, and he's come round to see about it!"

He ended with a laugh that made her shrink afresh.

"A husband!" she screamed. "Me! Why, I hate husbands, tiresome, boring things! A man with a great shiny nose and dirty neck! How can I put anybody in the attic, even relations, after he's had it?"

Adam struggled with a smile and was not altogether successful. "Even relations!" he echoed. "Is this fellow one?"

"Oh no, he's even worse than that! Lots of mine are dreadful, but they do wash, and they don't drink. He said a lot of strange things that were double Dutch, nasty and silly things. That it was law to live with me, and where did I keep the beer, and that it was a somethinged rum start something him if it wasn't! And wimmin were comin' it strong and no mistike!"

Unconsciously she echoed the cockney beery tones exactly.

"Well, we'd better go and see about it," said Adam tartly. "I suppose the man's drunk and has mistaken his way, but if you will live in chambers sacred to bachelors you have no right to complain when such things happen, and perhaps this will show you——"

"That I had better quit? Well, I don't happen to be a quitter in any sense of the word. Please be quick! He's making the whole place smell of bad beer and onions, and is lying with his dirty neck on one cushion, and his dirty boots on another, but it's his neck that really matters."

Adam Beare walked, for the first time, into Meg's quaint sitting-room, and found matters exactly as she had represented them, which astonished him, for he had allowed for exaggeration.

"Get out of this!" he said, advancing in a threatening manner.

The somnolent gentleman looked slightly alarmed, and condescended to sit up, but he did not move from the settee. "'Ere I be, and 'ere I stiy," he remarked with determination, "lesswiys the kitchen, it miy be for years and it miy be for hever as the poet siys, but——"

"There! Didn't I tell you!" Meg turned tragically to Adam.

"Thought she were a single lidy," observed the intruder, "but you never knows with these single ladies!" He began to whistle a music-hall ditty.

The veins on Adam's forehead swelled suddenly. "You had better be careful," he said.

"Oh, of course, if you are 'er husbint or anythink o' that sort, well that puts a different complexion on the fice as they siy of Pears' soap. As for goin', well, piy the rent and I'm O. P. H.!" He stumbled to his feet.

Adam's face grew long. "You are a——"

"Bailiff. Yes, you guessed right the very first time!"

"Is a bailiff something in law?" asked Meg, looking puzzled. "And what business is the rent of his? As long as the landlord doesn't bother——"

"Not bother! That's a good 'un, that is! Why 'e's been writin' mornin' noon an' night for hages, first perlite, then a bit stiff, an' then real rude, threatenin' to send me——"

"It must have been some of those blue envelopes I

burnt because they always were coming ! ” gasped the girl.

“ Without reading ? ” inquired Adam drily.

“ I hadn’t time, I didn’t know it mattered ; they looked so dull and frumpy. I hate blue envelopes ! ”

The bailiff chuckled hoarsely. “ There’s others the sime, miss, there’s others the sime ! I’m put in by the landlord, see, an’ ’ere I stiys along o’ the goods, till my account is piyed, and if you don’t piy, than I have me orders to dis-train on the goods.”

“ And the landlord seemed such a nice man ! ” exclaimed Margaret disgusted. “ I’ll never trust landlords again, never ! ”

Adam’s mouth twitched.

The bailiff burst into loud laughter. “ It strikes me, miss, as maybe the boot’ll be on the other leg ! Now ’ave you the cash, or ’aven’t you ? You could part with some of that there if there’s vallerables,” he waved a gross hand towards her cherished cabinet of china, “ any little thing you can put up the spout, eh, and reclaim at your earliest convenience ? It’s very simple, ’cept the reclaimin’.” He chuckled again.

“ What’s a spout, whose spout ? ” asked Margaret. “ Oh, do you mean a pawn-shop ? ” She turned to Adam. “ I suppose you know all about them. Will you take me to one, please ? Is there one close ? ”

“ Round the corner.”

“ Are they always round the corner, like public-houses ? ”

The bailiff went off into another fit of laughter.

Margaret pulled Adam’s sleeve. “ But are they ? Always handy, I mean ? ”

“ Oh, they are handy enough ! ” admitted Adam unwillingly.

“ Then what do they like ? I haven’t any jewellery. Some of that stuff in the cabinet is valuable.” Meg had the unerring eye for picking up “ bits ” in china. “ That funny old lamb now, it’s worth a frightful lot really, and there’s my silver tea-service. Will you help me carry the things and show me the ropes ? Oh dear, I shall miss the dear things ! ” She undid the cabinet door as she spoke.

“ You’ll get ’em back, miss,” said the bailiff good-naturedly, adding to himself, “ I don’t think ! We all

get a little under the weather now and then, in more'n one sense," he grinned sheepishly. "Just think on't as a loan. Why, I've took the bed afore now, though I must siy as that did go agin the grain."

"Oh, you wicked, cruel man!"

"Hengland expects every man, even bailiffs, to do their duty, miss, an' I've a wife an' five childer, bless 'um!"

"I don't call that any excuse," said Margaret loftily.

"You waits till your time comes, miss, you'll find——"

"That will do!" commanded Adam. He turned to Meg. "Well, are you ready! Where are the things?"

Meg collected them. The silver tea-service, two silver entrée dishes and sauce boat that Philip had sent her on her birthday—he always was sending her things—and the grotesque, but valuable, china lamb.

"You seem to know your way very well," said Meg as they proceeded to the pawn-shop.

Adam took no notice of this suggestive impertinence.

She laughed suddenly. "It's funny, isn't it? Oh, I wish Madge and Tom could see me now!"

"It does not amuse me."

"But you have no sense of humour, have you, Rochester? I would not marry a man without a sense of humour for anything."

"Let's hope he will have the sense of humour not to desire that honour, then."

"There's no harm in hope, Mr. Adam Beare! Do you know I knew another Adam once, a boy I loved? It was a very long time ago, and a very sad and dreadful story. I cannot bear to think of it even now."

"Then don't," he answered brusquely, "it's always well to let sleeping dogs lie."

"I always meant to marry him when I grew up, and now he's dead."

"Better so perhaps." He did not look at her.

Meg giggled. "Better dead than married to me! You think he would prefer it if he had the choice?"

"I have no doubt he would prefer it."

"Oh, you are rude. Poor boy, I little guessed the tragedy of his life. I wish I had known. Oh, I wish I had known. I might have done something."

"This is the pawn-shop," he said drily.

Meg emerged from her errand somewhat sobered. She had thought the experience, because it was new, might prove interesting; it had only proved very humiliating, and rather painful. "The next time I see that horrid man it will be to redeem the things!" she exclaimed with an optimism that events were not to justify. "He seemed to know you. I thought essayists and critics made lots of money?"

"I do not happen to be eminent. When my essays appear in book form they hardly sell an edition. It may, or may not be literature, it certainly isn't wealth. We must go to the novelette-writer or 'popular' mediocrity for that."

She flushed angrily, and strode on affronted, her head held high, and like Little-Johnny-Head-in-air she walked off the edge of her world—in this instance the pavement—and jarred herself unpleasantly.

"Hadh't you better look where you are going?"

"I'm going where I like."

"Oh, if you prefer to fall off pavements . . ."

They walked on in angry silence, and parted without a word at the entrance of Callogan Mansions.

She paid the bailiff with a lordly air. "Now don't you come troubling me again, my man!" she said in her best manner.

"S'long!" he retorted cheerfully. "I'll siy au revoir, and not good-bye, as the poets siy, and you can tike it from me they knew, poets bein' mostly in the mud so-to-speak——"

"Go away when I tell you. And you are not to come near my flat again, do you understand?"

He understood all right, but he came just the same.

She watched him depart. "He's a character," she reminded herself, "I'll put him in the book." She was writing her first novel, and believed it a very remarkable creation, and that publishers would be fighting to get it when it was ready. She had, however, promised Andrew that he should take it to Bayliss and Jenner in the first instance.

She went round to the office of *Every Girl's Sweetheart* with her high crest considerably lowered. Debt and difficulties loomed rather large just then, money had to be found somehow. She must get off her high horse and ask Fairchilds for more work.

"Here's the comet," she said to her aunt, "come down with a bump. Oh, the poor orphan! What do you think he will do when he goes to Oxford, Aunt Luce?"

"I don't think, I know, everything he shouldn't. But what have you come for?"

"Work, more work. You can say 'I told you so,' if you like, and feel awfully clever, though I always think it's cleverer not to say it. Fairchilds can grind me small for a bit. I'm a lamb, an obedient machine, anything you wish."

"Money?"

"Yes, money, that contemptible stuff we can't do without. Hand over commissions ad lib, Aunt Luce!"

Miss Lister was only too ready to obey, and Fairchilds were pleased. Undoubtedly the young Miss Lister had it in her to be one of their big successes. She was already their most popular writer.

Margaret departed to work at the stuff she hated, and to put the precious book aside. No time for art now! The body must be fed, "the beastly body," as she called it, and "the beastly pot" had also to be made to boil. It was wonderful how easy it was to get into financial difficulties, and how difficult to get out of them. It seemed to her as if she was never out of them! She got to know the pawnshop only too intimately. True, she got her treasures out, but they seemed no sooner out than in again. The silver went first, the "ewe lamb" last, and her intimates could usually tell the state of her finances by a glance at the china cupboard.

"Rejoice with me, for I have found the lamb which was lost!" she would cry profanely when it was once more restored to its own place, and everybody did rejoice.

"Perhaps life is dull without ups and downs," she remarked thoughtfully.

"It's duller when it's all downs," retorted Silly Billy with gloom. "I've half a mind to chuck it and try the Colonies."

"The Colonies don't want Silly Billies," returned Deal-mere, "they'd chuck you, old son!"

"T any rate," observed Margaret, "even if life isn't all fun, it's still mostly fun." But there was something akin to defiance in her tones.

CHAPTER XXXV

LOW WATER, AND "LUCK"

ALAS! Meg did not long continue "sensible." The claims of the novel, "Fortune's Fool," became insistent, and she neglected Fairchilds, writing very little for them, and that little carelessly and badly.

Her aunt remonstrated with her in vain, pointed out that Miss Jessie Farwight, a promising writer with no ambitions above Fairchilds, was treading hard on her heels. "Once you're out with Fairchilds you're out for good," she warned her. "Miss Jessie Farwight is proving invaluable; there is not room for the two of you. Oh, Meg, be warned in time!"

But Meg, deep in the novel which was to bring her instant fame and fortune, turned a deaf ear. It was all very simple. She would finish the novel as soon as possible. Bayliss and Jenner would take it, pay her an advance down. Then a little later would come the royalties on edition after edition. What could be easier? It only meant hard work and a little patience. True, Fairchilds or the novel must go, she could not serve two masters; well, let Fairchilds go; after all it would be no loss. She could get enough money to go on with from somewhere.

Fairchilds lost patience, they had been very patient, and delivered an ultimatum; either she was to give her complete attention to them and their requirements, or they would dispense with her services.

The foolish girl told Fairchilds to go to—somebody else, and they went to Miss Jessie Farwight, so that the days of Meg's prosperity departed from her. The novel on which she built such high hopes was not half finished.

She had, of course, to get other work to keep body and soul together, and she found it surprisingly difficult. The

rival firms did not exactly ask why she had left Fairchilds, but they drew their own conclusions. Since her work, when she took any trouble about it, was alive and good, she got things placed here and there, but at a lesser rate.

She became, in fact, the casual labourer of Fleet Street, the struggling, outside contributor, whose work is returned more often than it is accepted. She had been accustomed to an income whose size and regularity depended upon herself. Did she want anything extra? Then she had but to write an extra complete novelette or serial, and Fairchilds took it gladly, and asked for more.

She had got a short story or so into the monthlies, but had stuck at that. They would only take the tales she thought the worst and most obvious. They would never touch the matter she thought so good herself. Much of her work was so weird and bizarre, so tragic, that, without a reputation, it was unsaleable. With one it might have been worth a great deal.

So the grim struggle for existence started for Margaret Lister and she did not like it much.

Nobody guessed quite how bad it was, though Andrew Merriment had grievous suspicions, and once left an anonymous steak on her kitchen table.

He got it full in the face on his return from work. "I don't want your messy rubbish in my kitchen," said Margaret very sharply, "please be more careful in future!"

"I know nothing about it," he lied sullenly, but he picked it up, and faded away looking very ridiculous and unhappy. No more gifts of that nature pursued her. True, the Wolf, as she called him, announced a journalistic scoop, and a dinner to celebrate it, and took his three housemates and Meg to a Soho restaurant, where a very excellent meal could be had at a moderate price, and that he ate so voraciously, his long, lean jaws working like his namesake's, that the very hearty appetite of Meg passed unnoticed.

That he lay down on his bed afterwards and groaned, is neither here nor there.

On a day that Meg, gaunter, more sallow, and if possible plainer than ever, rather faint for want of a good meal, and more than a little shabby in best coat and skirt, began to wonder if life was such fun after all, she came upon one who had never even supposed it anything of the sort, and

acted in a manner that every sensible person must condemn.

It was one of those January days when icy wind penetrates to the aching bones of the unclad, and even the fur-coated shrink a little.

The mongrel stood there cowering and shrinking in utmost desolation. His ribs were sticking out of his emaciated little body, and blood, drawn by a sharp stone, trickled down his flank; one foot was drawn painfully up where a heavy boot had kicked it. His eyes were piteous, terrified, starving. His owner had been rough and brutal, but any owner was better than none. The man, however, had purposely lost him towards the end of the month, having no mind to pay seven-and-sixpence. He could get another puppy and turn it adrift when its antics ceased to amuse.

The unhappy creature had wandered in search of home and master, and found instead a cruel world. Foolishly he had sought human sympathy; now he was doing his best to avoid it.

He shrank from Meg as he shrank from them all, but somehow he saw her eyes, and they were neither hard nor actively cruel, nor just indifferent, and she saw his. The next moment the filthy body was clasped tight in her arms.

"We're both down on our luck," she said, "so we'll keep each other company, but we won't give in to the beast of a world. It shan't play football with us, eh?"

The dog, who had served as a football not very long before she found him, licked her face in answer.

Adam met Meg and her burden on the stairs, and eyed her with disgust. "What a filthy little mongrel!" he exclaimed.

"A lost, starving, ill-treated one."

"So you are going to feed another mouth and pay for a licence because you can afford neither!"

She flushed angrily. "That's my business."

"It's also my business, seeing the brute will spend his time barking and rushing about. Turn it out!"

"To starve? To be kicked, stoned, bound to an operating table? One never knows!" All the tragedies of the dumb and helpless brute world looked out of the eyes which burned in her white exhausted face.

Adam looked past her. "More likely taken to the dogs' home and painlessly destroyed."

"It's an insensate world and I hate it! The rich and the well-fed cannot afford sentiment or sympathy because they cannot understand; the others understand but they haven't the wherewithal to help." Her voice shook and she held the whimpering dog against her throat.

"You have paid your rent, I believe," the speaker's tones were very hard, "but you have sold or pawned half your possessions. Is this a time to adopt expensive pets?"

"Since when have you taken to poking and prying?" She glared at him, and he thought how deadly white and thin her great shadowy dark eyes made her face look. When had she had her last meal? Why didn't she look after herself better? His rage grew. She would probably go hungry to bed to-night as she had done the night before, and he had been too furious to sleep very well. "You attend to your own affairs," she said hotly, "and leave me to attend to mine."

"It's all very well. A man can get on somehow. His depths have a limitation: a woman's have none."

"What do you mean?" The faint colour died out of her lips.

"Never mind," he waved the subject away with repulsion. "Give me the dog and I will take it to the lethal chamber. Will that satisfy you?"

The dog whimpered suddenly.

"No," said Meg, "it's such a short span of life; why should we cut it shorter?"

"Why should we dree the weird of others? Isn't our own enough, too much often? Listen to me! Bow that stubborn neck of yours and go and eat humble pie at Fairchild's."

She stared with amazement. "You who mocked at me for writing such stuff to advise that! Oh, talk of women being illogical!"

He moved restlessly. "They fed you, didn't they?" he snapped, "and food happens to be a disgusting necessity."

Meg drew herself up. "I will not sell my birthright for a mess of pottage, and I will not brook your interference either! Perhaps you don't happen to know I am nearly through my novel, 'Fortune's Fool.' It will give me all I lack, and make everything worth while."

Adam shrugged his shoulders, and gave an exasperated exclamation.

"Oh, of course, you don't believe me! But Bayliss, Jenner and Co. are going to consider it when it's done. Of course they will take it gladly! It's the sort of book to make people think."

"Never make the B. P. think, they don't like it," he retorted sardonically. "It only requires also something to make them feel uncomfortable for the book to be an utter failure. And in any case you cannot hope to get your first novel accepted."

"Well, I shall soon be able to prove otherwise, I hope. In the meanwhile this is the new inmate of Callogan Mansions, and I'm going to call him 'Luck' for luck!"

"He will probably desert you at the first opportunity. Anyway for the sake of peace and quiet be good enough to feed him!"

He returned from his own room with a dish of chops which he banged down on the kitchen table.

"That's your dinner," said Meg, eyeing it a little longingly all the same.

"No, it isn't," he contradicted rudely. "I was dining out with Willet this evening." He departed before she had time to make further objections.

Meg washed the stranger, fed him, and shared the chops. "So you've brought me luck after all," she said, "for you've started by providing me with a meal I really did require rather badly."

There were, however, some lean days still ahead of them before the tide turned slightly in the young writer's favour, and a rival firm of Fairchilds put her on their list as a regular contributor. Her novel was nearly finished by that time, and it seemed to her it could not possibly lack an enthusiastic reception.

Luck should have turned out a grateful and noble beast, "faithful unto death," and so on. He did nothing of the sort; he was merely a very doggy dog and far from being a paragon. Even his devotion to Meg could not subdue his high spirits and other propensities; he barked and careered madly all over the Mansions, and stole from Adam's larder on more than one occasion, and also worried his carpet slippers to a quick death. Adam thrashed the

culprit and let Meg know what he thought about it. "Women never can train dogs!" he grumbled.

"Not when he's first of all been trained wrong by a man," she retorted, "it's the untraining that's the trouble! Oh, Luck, you bad dog!"

Luck looked at her with bright eyes and wagged a hilarious tail. Surely the skilful provider should have honour in his own country! Why should the humans commandeer all the chops of the world? If the weak could get the better of the strong and the selfish now and then, was not that all to the credit of the weak? Of course, owing to the odd prejudices of these humans who wanted everything for themselves and would gorge at four meals while permitting him only one, it was a sin to be found out. And for that sin he was always ready to show contrition. Even a dog objects to the consequences.

"Oh, Luck, don't look so sorry! Of course I forgive you!" And Meg patted him to show she meant it. "He has a very beautiful nature," she thought.

Then the novel was finished and sent off, and she waited confidently for the appreciation and delight of the publishers.

"It's done, it's gone!" she said gaily to Adam.

"What?"

"'Fortune's Fool.' I shall be rich and famous in no time now."

"I doubt it, Miss Lister! And in any case a too early flowering does not always pay in the long run; the plant can't stand it. Look at some of the novelists who had a boom with their first book, and have never had another! They were spoken of as 'promising' then, they are just 'promising' still. Theirs is the saddest army of all, for their future lies behind them."

"Oh, of course I shall go on from one success to another. And I'm not afraid of criticism, it's like a cold east wind; it withers the weak, but it braces the strong. Even you shall not see me wince. You will 'go' for it, won't you, because it is a woman's?"

"It is not published yet," he reminded her.

"But it will be some day."

"Something will be some day, possibly."

"And you will make mincemeat of it because you detest me and all women?"

"I should advise you to avoid the 'literary taint' as you would the devil. It's the thing that outsiders coming among us notice first, I think."

"Well, I haven't got it yet," said Margaret making a face, "you needn't be so fussy. After all intellect doesn't rule the world, very far from it! It is character that does that. Where are the intellectuals in the race of Empire; Greece, France, still the most brilliant intellectually? And where is the Briton, of whose intellect the least said the better? Oh, you needn't worry, Rochester. The smaller the 'celebrity,' the greater the self-importance; the smaller the self-importance, the greater the celebrity! And when I have made a reputation I am not going to be content to live on it. After all a reputation is never really made. It's always growing, or going!"

"And all this because you have finished your first novel, which is bound, at the best, to be crude at twenty——"

"Almost twenty-one."

"And is probably quite unpublishable."

"I shall show you their acceptance, say 'I told you so!'"

"Or I will use that atrocious phrase, 'Well, we will see!'"

"And if I have the struggle that Heriot Pallister had, I will still go on, though I cannot hope for his splendid ideals. Oh, why did they make him wait so long?"

Adam laughed harshly. "Need you ask? Didn't he preach a new message? Isn't that enough to damn any man? They came face to face with it once, a couple of thousand years ago, an ideal so high, a man so great, that many believed it the Divine Manifestation, and Him they crucified. He was the new thing in a world of old idols; a crank. 'What have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth?' That was their answer yesterday. That is their answer for all time, that and the cross." He passed on laughing harshly.

Margaret looked after him with paling face. "Oh, he can be rather awful!" she thought. "Still, I am going to be the one to say, 'I told you so!'"

But she was over-optimistic. Bayliss and Jenner wrote kindly and encouragingly, they had given her MS. special consideration, and had found much promise in it. They would be glad if she would send her next novel to them for

consideration. They regretted that they found themselves unable to publish "Fortune's Fool." It was too chaotic; the construction was bad, though much of the material excellent. If they might be permitted to suggest such a thing, they would advise her to put aside this work, and when she was older and more experienced, to start a new one. In the meanwhile she would do well to study the books of So-and-So. This was the gist of the letter which brought tears of dismay to Margaret's eyes.

She knocked at Adam's door and he came out grumbling in answer, asking her sharply what she wanted.

She held up the returned MS. and the letter. "Now say it!" she commanded, trying to smile.

"That is unnecessary. Some day you may be glad that your first novel is not fated to see the light of day. May I look at the letter?" He read it carefully. "Very encouraging," he said, handing it back, "you can't do better than take their advice, though I suppose that's the last thing you mean to do?"

"Then you suppose wrong. It happens to be the first!" And it was she who shut her door with a bang this time. She cast her high hopes and dreams of fortune into the flames and forgot to give the indignant Luck his dinner till he reminded her. It was silly to sit and cry, he thought, when there was food to be had.

A few days later he started out in pursuit of a belligerent fox-terrier. Then rough lads joined in the chase, and remembering their treatment on a former occasion, he fled in terror without any sense of direction, and once more a lost dog roamed the streets.

Meg was frantic when she discovered what had happened. She dashed without ceremony into Adam's sitting-room. "Luck's gone!" she wailed. "Come and help me to look for him!"

"Hang the dog! Do you know he stole my chop yesterday?"

"If you will leave things about——"

"He took it off my table when I got up for a book——"

"It's awfully bad for you to read at meals. He was thinking of your digestion. It's Thieves Alley I'm afraid of."

"Thieves don't steal the worse than useless——"

"I want you to go down Clore Road, I shall try the other direction."

As Adam looked down Clore Road for a dog he neither expected nor desired to see again, he could almost have wished dog and mistress in the river with a stone round their tiresome necks. "Then, damn it all, I might have a bit of peace, learn once more what a quiet life means!" he told himself furiously. "What a purgatory she's made of the place. I can't call my soul, let alone the stairs, my own."

Then he started, swore again, for a filthy abject object was fawning upon him. It was Luck.

When he got back Meg had returned after a useless search and was making herself unspeakably miserable, imagining all sorts of horrors. When Adam entered with the culprit she lost her head in an access of gratitude.

She flung herself on Adam. "Oh, thank you, thank you! I will not hate you any more!" Standing on tiptoe she threw her arms round his neck, made an ineffectual dart with her lips at his ear.

He pushed her violently away, turned a dusky crimson. "Madam, I prefer that you should hate me!" he thundered.

Meg hung her head, suddenly very much ashamed of herself. What had made her do such a frightful, such an immodest thing? A burning blush scorched her whole body. "I was not thinking of what I was doing . . ." she faltered miserably. "Oh, I didn't kiss you quite, say I didn't!"

She clasped her hands in horror.

Again Adam turned an ugly crimson. "Of course not!" he said, and stalked away.

Meg put the filthy and protesting Luck into the bath, and was drying him lustily to the accompaniment of a gay whistle, when Adam popped in his head.

"Would it be too much to ask," he began in his most disagreeable tones, "that when you dry that brute, you dry him on your own towel, not mine? The last time you left mine sopping and covered with hairs. Faugh!"

"All right, Rochester," she answered, adding to herself, or almost to herself, "fussy creature!"

"Well, see that it is all right, please!"

"Did the nasty man say he wasn't to be dried proper

then?" demanded Meg of the dog when Adam had departed. "Well, we mustn't use old Fussy's towel, that's certain." She flung the sopping thing down, and stood up.

Then a sudden thought occurred to her, and she examined the wet towel in alarm.

"Hanged if it isn't the Bear's after all!" she gasped. "He will think I did it on purpose, and to annoy him."

Which was exactly what the very angry man did think!

CHAPTER XXXVI

IMPUDENCE MAKES ANOTHER ASSAULT ON DIGNITY

MEG had been at Callogan Mansions some two years, years of constant sparring with her neighbour, when she committed a fresh assault upon his dignity.

The sun of prosperity was, temporarily, shining upon her, and on her bed lay a new hat, a smart coat and skirt, and a very elaborate lace blouse. She had promised to meet Philip at a theatre box-office a few minutes before the matinée was due to start, and she had left herself rather short of time.

She dashed into her clothes, and found that three of the blouse-buttons had to be left undone. "It doesn't matter gaping at the back," she thought in her casual way, "if I haven't to take my coat off. But I am sure to feel the heat and do so, forgetting all about my back-view." She might descend into the lower regions and find Sue-Sue, whose hands would probably be quite black, and who would as likely as not say she hadn't been engaged as "lady's maid," and decline to fumble at all. There was nobody else.

Then she heard Adam leave his room and dashed across and intercepted him, swinging round and presenting the gaping view. "Please button me up the back," she demanded, "and oh! be quick!"

"Button you up the back!" he echoed in a dazed voice.

"Yes, it's quite easy, and there's nobody else. I can't go out like this." She wriggled her back at him.

Adam hesitated, breathed heavily, and then to his own astonishment, found himself fumbling for the buttons. "How the—however does the thing work?" he asked peevishly.

"How slow you are! Andrew could have done it in a second!"

"Not when you're wriggling and jumping about all the time!" he returned with some heat, "and the—the dashed button-holes are too small!"

"Your fingers are too big and clumsy. Haven't you got it yet!"

"I've done one, but it looks rather odd."

"Oh, how stupid you are! You've got the wrong button-hole! It should be the one opposite. I should have thought even you might have known that!"

He undid it grumbling.

"Need you be so slow? Philip will think I'm not going to turn up."

Adam damned the button with sudden, awful ferocity.

"And who is Philip?" he asked.

"Oh, just a boy I know. Nobody that would interest you."

"A boy of twenty-five or so, I presume?"

"Then you presume wrong. A boy of sixteen. I have not seen him for ages and he is an old friend. He was to have come up to London several times to stay with the Setons, but each time his mother stopped it. She said he was outgrowing his strength, that London would be bad for him, and that he was better at Daventry."

Adam started, and the button he had at length fastened was jerked out of its button-hole. "I never saw anything so idiotic as women's clothes, never!" he exclaimed. "Philip, Philip who?"

"Daventry, of course, an awfully nice kid. I expect you will see him, he's sure to be here often now he is at last in London."

"I do not wish to see him."

"You're blowing down my neck."

"If you won't keep still——"

"You are making me later and later."

He was annoyed to notice the undoubted beauty of her white neck, and how prettily her dark hair grew at the nape of it. She was less sallow, less thin than she had been, consequently less plain, and she dressed better and no longer pulled her hair tightly off her face.

"There, it's fastened now. Anything else I may have the honour of doing? Your hair? Are your boots buttoned?"

Margaret stuck out a slender, shapely foot. "They're

shoes," she said, "and it isn't very nice of you to talk like that about my hair after the time and trouble I've spent doing it with a view of taking off my hat."

He departed without vouchsafing an answer, and Meg hurried to the theatre. Of course she was late.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" she cried apologetically, as a slender, delicate-looking boy came forward to greet her, and held her hands without speaking for a moment, his eyes devouring her face. "I couldn't get buttoned up in time."

"Oh, Meg, at last!" the boy gasped thankfully.

"I say, Phil, you have grown!"

He sighed. "I'm not nearly as tall as you. I should love to be tall and strong."

"Oh, you are sure to grow more yet. I grew ages after I was sixteen."

They looked at each other curiously. Philip saw, as ever, the most wonderful and beautiful of girls, even more beautiful than he had believed possible, he thought. She was quite unlike everybody else. Dear Old Meg! What joy to be sitting next her, just the two of them! What joy to think he would see her often now, be daily at her flat! That he could spend his liberal pocket money taking her to this and to that; buying things for her rooms!

Meg saw a boy so pretty that he should have been a girl. He had delicate, beautifully-cut features, a shapely, sensitive mouth, a very fair, clear, white skin which flushed constantly, arched, auburn eyebrows, auburn hair, and red-brown eyes.

"What a sensation he would make as a girl!" she thought to herself. "He would be the Season's beauty. I believe he is really more fitted to be a girl. He is like what his mother was, and yet he reminds me of somebody else too. I wonder whom."

"Sixteen," said Philip suddenly, "it has been so long coming! Every year I get nearer to it now."

"To what?" she asked idly.

"To being a man, to being master."

"Oh, Phil, what's the hurry?" she exclaimed almost impatiently. "Youth goes so quickly, it's dreadful. Think of me. When you are twenty-one I shall be twenty-seven, quite old. Don't be in a hurry, for my sake."

"But it is for your sake," he answered low.

CHAPTER XXXVII

LADY DAVENTRY CALLS AT CALLOGAN MANSIONS

LADY DAVENTRY had not been in London since the ruin of her beauty. She had been an imperious queen before that happening, the most beautiful woman of the day, and she would not return to take a lesser place, to see one, less beautiful than she had been then or would have been now, claim the admiration that was her due.

So she remained at Daventry which every year became more dear to her, a greater obsession. There were still things to be done, still opportunities for her powers.

But when Philip had been gone only a little time, she came suddenly to London. She went straight to the Setons and found Lady Seton at home, and thanked her graciously for her hospitality towards Philip.

Lady Seton laughed. "But, Lady Daventry, my boy has almost lived at your place! It is a great treat to have Phil, he is a dear boy!" Her eyes softened, her heart contracted with pity for this woman who had borne so much, and borne it so heroically. Her devotion to her old husband, her genuine love for him, had grown to be a household word. She had nearly died in her effort to save him, and she had lost her beauty in a very shocking fashion. The face that had been so extraordinarily lovely was now extraordinarily repulsive. Her eyes were drawn up crookedly, only their vivid blue was unchanged, her nose had little resemblance left to its former perfection, and her mouth—her mouth was terrible. The glorious gold of her hair served but to make the travesty more awful.

This trial, perhaps the worst a fair woman could know, was borne with a fortitude and dignity that made her almost revered. She was still "the great Lady Daventry."

Lady Seton could only wonder at her courage in coming

up to the scene of her former triumphs, and admire the mother-love that brought her. She wished there was something she could do to help this most noble and unfortunate woman. She wished she could like as well as respect her.

"This was to be a pleasant surprise for Philip? I don't think he knew?"

"I made up my mind so suddenly," murmured Lady Daventry.

"And he is out, at Callogan Mansions as usual! How disappointed he will be to miss you!"

Lady Daventry smiled, her dreadful, distorted smile. "Oh, I will go round and call for him," she said. "Let me see, what is the exact address? I'm afraid I have forgotten it."

Lady Seton gave it laughing. "We tease Phil, say he is becoming quite a Bohemian, and that this Miss Margaret Lister must be proving dangerous to his peace of mind. Of course he is just a child, and she an old friend from Daventry, but I'm afraid we all rather take a delight in making Phil blush, he blushes so easily. What a pretty boy he is! I assure you I feel quite jealous when I have to take my blunt-featured Rupert to anything, and everybody stares at your boy and asks who he is. Not that he is available, these days, Miss Lister has first claim, it seems."

"Oh yes," agreed Lady Daventry, smiling, "I must really look the girl up, her father is the Daventry vicar. Her twin was very pretty, but Margaret is one of the plainest of gawky, dowdy girls, so that I fear your shafts were wasted! She's seven or eight years older than Phil."

"Ah yes, that's usually the case, isn't it? I was glad to see Phil in such good spirits. He is rather quiet as a rule, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid he is not very strong," sighed Lady Daventry anxiously. "I do hope he won't mind returning to Daventry with me. I don't want to be selfish, but his place is there, isn't it? And the doctor was so unwilling for him to go to London even for a few days. He says the bracing North Sea air was just what he wanted. You know we Northerners rather wilt in the south. Perhaps I am rather over-anxious, but you see he is all I have."

"I quite understand, we shall miss him dreadfully, but

I think you are right. He is rather a delicate boy, and growing fast, and it is rather close here now, though I thought him really looking very well. But then gay high spirits make such a difference, don't they?"

"The greatest difference," agreed Lady Daventry rising. She had never seen Philip high-spirited or gay.

"I'm glad I came," she thought as she was being driven to the Mansion. "That girl . . ." Her face darkened. She had disliked Dosé, been furious that she should bring happiness to the man she had marked for misery, whom her long arm should reach even yet. His paper was dying, everyone said so; it would come into the market; then Bruce would certainly not remain editor.

She had more than disliked Meg. If the girl had been other than poor and obscure she would have hated her, but she stood too low a thing to challenge hatred. She could not interfere with Lady Daventry; could not come into her life at all. She had dared to put out a hand towards Philip, but Philip was going to be taken out of her clutches. The girl had hoped to make use of him because he was Lord Daventry; was possibly even absurd enough to have social ambitions. Did she imagine Philip could, or would, open Society's doors to her, and how? Hadn't the girl learned that only another woman could do that, or a husband?

Lady Daventry was not given to laughter, but she laughed now at the thought of Meg married ambitiously; it was almost ridiculous to think of her married at all. Some half-starved journalist perhaps, some other struggling writer. Then where did Philip come in? Was she making him spend his money on her? Like father, like daughter! Mr. Lister would have had no scruples, the girl would have less; a contemptible brood: it was bad for the boy at his raw age, the girl might get an influence over him. Certainly he should return at once to Daventry. There were other reasons as far as that goes.

How fortunate she had yielded to the impulse to descend unexpectedly upon Philip! But then on the whole she had been fortunate. True she had had her misfortunes, her grief, her losses, but the things she had set out to win, place and power, remained, always should remain, she told herself. "I was born to be master of my own destiny,

and of others," she thought, "and I suppose I have always known it."

In her deal with the devil she had got the best of the bargain: she had cheated the great cheat. Not many could say that.

True, she had lost her dear companion, lost him in a shocking fashion, and missed him still; always would miss him, for he had left her, a woman, alone.

"If I could have known his last words, his message, I could have borne it better," she thought, "and now I can only wonder; I can never know."

For the rest, it had all been triumph. People, things, had opposed her, and she had conquered people and things. Fate had tried to bar her out of her desire, so she had juggled with Fate; conquered still. She had moulded human destinies, even futurity; her strong ugly grasping hands had shaped everything to her liking.

Now she was shaping Philip, moulding his destiny, and he was malleable clay to her liking. Deliberately she had sickened him of Daventry, giving him a longing for London and freedom. Deliberately she was tearing him away before he had fully tasted the desired fruit.

It was all a means to an end. Philip would come of age, her pawn, and tool, yearning for freedom, hating Daventry. He would go to London, live there and abroad. Daventry would but mean a duty visit now and then. He would have great wealth to spend; she would have Daventry and all the power. He would be thankful it should be so. He would probably send his son and heir to Daventry, and she would train him to her purpose. She meant to marry Philip young, she had no fancy for a "stage romance." Let him have his stage fancies after he was safely and suitably married; that was the time, not before. She was glad there was still something to plan, someone to mould; he might not want to marry Celia, and yet, inevitably, she knew that he would marry her, if she desired it.

Philip seek any way but hers! Philip make a bid for mastery!

The driver of the cab pulled up, and when his fare made no motion to alight, came grumbling to the door. "This is Callogan mansions, mum," he said.

"Wait for me," answered Lady Daventry, getting out, "I shall not be long."

She had to ring three times before Sue-Sue answered the door. Then she stood and stared rather aggressively at the visitor.

"Is Lord Daventry here? Kindly tell his lordship his mother is waiting for him," commanded Lady Daventry.

Sue-Sue wrapped her shawl more closely round her. "There ain't no lords or lordships come to these buildings," she returned. "There's only Mister Phil upstairs a-messin' round with Miss Lister as usual. It's third floor, second door to your right," and she vanished.

Lady Daventry mounted the stairs with added annoyance. What a place for Lord Daventry!

Meg and Philip were alone in the kitchen, very intent over the gas stove on which stood a large saucepan. "It's turning brown!" said the boy triumphantly. "It's not going to be a hash this time, the others won't get the laugh of us again." He alluded to the four young men who had returned in the evening on a certain memorable occasion, desiring to be shown the batch of toffee, and had insisted on believing that Meg and Philip had eaten it all when there was nothing to show. At length they had been taken to view a burnt, sticky mass in the rubbish-bin, and been rather merciless in their chaff ever since.

"Yes, it's all right," said Meg, "just give it another stir, will you? I feel roasted!"

She looked it. Her face was burnt an unbecoming scarlet, there was a black smear across one cheek; she had purposely put on old and rather disreputable clothes which she had, as a matter of fact, outgrown. Her hair was coming down; she was gaping at the back. She looked an ugly slut, there was no other word for it.

"Who's that coming up?" he asked suddenly.

"It's too early for the boys, must be the Bear," she returned; "but it isn't his step."

"No," said Philip, and turned very pale, "I think it is my mother."

Lady Daventry entered.

"Ah, Philip, they told me I should find you here." She came forward, rather heavily veiled, a graceful, distinguished-looking woman, till one saw her too near. She

looked at Margaret, who, plainer than ever, impossibly hideous and untidy, even dirty, stared back at her with the old disconcerting eyes.

She knew her, but it was easier to pretend otherwise. This slut——

"Will you tell your mistress, Miss Lister, I am here, my good girl," she asked pleasantly, "or is she out, and has his lordship taken you from your duties for this?" She waved her hand towards the toffee. "It is too bad of him, and quite too good-natured of you!" She smiled graciously.

Philip went scarlet, fought for words, for breath. Oh, this was horrible! Meg, his Meg, spoken to like this, insulted! Because she had old clothes and a dirty face. Didn't people always put on old clothes to make toffee? Didn't they always get smeared? Possibly he was smeared himself. Oh, his mother ought to have known it could be nobody but Meg, wonderful Meg. To take her for a servant!

"I—Oh——" he began choking.

But Margaret had come forward. "I think you know me, Lady Daventry," she said very quietly.

"Of course I do, now," answered the elder woman, "please forgive my mistake. It was quite unpardonable." Her twisted smile made it seem the only possible one. There was a glass in the kitchen, and Meg's eyes went to it. Then she looked away very quickly. What an unspeakable fright, what an atrocious slut! But Lady Daventry had known her at once.

"I think," she said clearly, "that the mistake, had you made it, was entirely justifiable. I cannot afford a maid unfortunately, and I cannot imagine one who would consent to wear such clothes!"

She laughed with a careless ease that annoyed the other.

"I must ask you to accept my excuses," Lady Daventry turned, a possessive hand on her son's shoulder. "Come, Philip," she said, "we must not trespass any longer on Miss Lister's good nature."

"Oh, mother, the toffee will be spoilt after all."

He could think of nothing else to say; the situation was beyond him. And he was so bitterly, deeply ashamed. How could Meg ever forgive a thing like this? It was his mother who had done it. She had insulted the most

wonderful girl who ever lived, a girl it was the greatest privilege to know, a girl who had put up with a "mere stupid kid" out of good-nature because there was nobody in the world as kind and good as she was.

Now he was being humiliated before her, made as small as possible in her eyes, just a child ordered about by its mother. Oh, he could not bear it, he would not bear it. He was Lord Daventry after all; but she just put her hand on his shoulder, spoke in her iron voice, saying "Come." He would not come. He would not wait till he was twenty-one to defy her; he would defy her now. She took everything away from him that he valued. It was too much. He would not stand it, no, by God, he would——

Then Lady Daventry pressed his shoulder a little harder, turned the keen, cold blue of her eyes on him. "I am waiting, Philip," she said.

He gave Meg one agonised look, then he followed his mother. He would see Meg next day, explain everything.

As the cab started he leaned forward. "Mother, to take her for a servant! Meg!"

"It was too stupid of me just to go by appearances," said Lady Daventry, "of course the moment she spoke I knew."

"Oh, mother, as if it needed that! What will she think?"

"I apologised, Philip, one cannot do more than that. I think she understood. You are not looking well. I was afraid London would not suit you, but I am glad, very glad, you have enjoyed yourself. I hope you did not impose too much on Miss Lister. She has her living to make, has she not, and her time must be valuable? And then you are almost young enough to be her son. I do hope she did not find you tiresome, dear."

"Meg is only six years older than I," answered Philip, "it is not too much difference to be friends. I do not think it will mean any difference worth speaking of later on."

"Later on?" she queried softly.

"When I come of age." There was a new note in his voice.

She was silent. Then the girl had made her bid. She was in temporary possession.

"You will be a great man, then," she said. "I hope you will stay at Daventry and do your duty by the place."

He did not answer.

"I expect you will want to marry and leave me all alone, you unkind boy." She laid her hand on his knee. "You must have someone very nice, someone pretty and loving."

The little Baroness was neither pretty nor loving, but it was Lady Daventry's intention to make her seem both.

"I do not like ugly women, mother."

"Of course not. You have too good taste. Do you already notice their looks? I suppose you prefer blue eyes and golden hair, eh?"

He looked quickly at the blue of his mother's eyes, the wonder of her hair, then down. "No," he said distastefully, "no, not blue eyes and golden hair."

The little Baroness was brown of hair and eyes. "No, of course you are so fair yourself, when the time comes you will choose a darker wife, I daresay. I hope you returned Miss Lister's hospitality, took her to the theatre or something? You have plenty of money and she is poor."

"Of course mother, often."

"So that was why you sent for more money?" she laughed.

Philip coloured. "One can't spend at Daventry," he said a little sullenly.

"But one can in London? Well, Philip, there is no reason why you shouldn't, or make toffee either. You and Celia shall make as much as you like."

"Celia would not care for toffee-making, mother. She hates anything that is messy, and I would not care for it without Meg and her friends. They make everything so jolly."

"I'm sure they do! By-the-bye, did you ever come across Bruce Daventry there? He married the twin sister."

Her voice changed at the hated name. She could seldom help that.

Philip had noticed it before; he noticed it afresh now. "Mother, you always speak of him as if you hated him!"

"He wronged your father very shamefully. It was

before your time, and a very old story now. He had to be sent away in disgrace."

"What did he do, mother?"

"He was a cheat. Did he ever go to that place when you were there?"

"He came once and Meg asked him to come up and see me, but he hadn't time. He's awfully busy editing and things, and then there is a kid he is fearfully devoted to. Meg thinks a lot of him, and she's mostly right. Are you sure, mother?"

"Of course I am sure. Margaret Lister knows nothing of it; she was only a baby herself at the time. I expect he was ashamed to face you."

"Oh, mother! All those years ago, one should forget, and, poor fellow, he has an awful hard time, Meg says. And then he was the heir and lost everything, and that's pretty—pretty rotten. If there hadn't been me——"

"But there had to be you, Philip," she interrupted harshly. "I have given you all you have, wealth, rank, everything. Never forget that. I paid heavily for you, Philip, how heavily only I know. And I nearly died when you were born."

Philip reddened with embarrassment. He felt his mother was demanding his love and gratitude. He had never had any love for her, only fear. And gratitude? It almost seemed that if she gave much, she took away more. He recurred to Margaret.

"When I see her to-morrow, perhaps I can make her understand," he said.

"I'm afraid you will not be able to see her to-morrow," answered Lady Daventry with inexorable gentleness, "you see, we leave very early for Daventry."

Philip struggled helplessly in the net. "Mother, I do not want to return to Daventry!" he cried.

"Philip, we cannot always do what we want; it is for the best, and I have arranged it with Lady Seton."

Philip did not answer. To himself he said, "Still five years!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A STRANGE COINCIDENCE

"I should have known what fruit would spring from such a seed."—
BYRON.

MEG at twenty-three was still struggling to maintain her precarious foothold in the literary world, and as far from fame and fortune as ever.

Miss Burney, returning after a year in Paris, rather full of her own concerns, could not understand it. "It seems odd," she said, "so much has happened to me, and so little to you."

She was in Meg's sitting-room, where Andrew and the youth Billy drifted casually in and out, their day's work being over; that of the two journalists was only just begun.

"You have not hurried to greet your friends since your return from the gay city," grumbled Meg. "Where have you been hiding yourself?"

Miss Burney went rather red. "Oh, I've been a bit busy," she said, and blurted out, "I'm going to be married."

"Good biz!" said Meg, "heaps of congrats.!"

"Vive l'entente cordiale," grinned Andrew, "a son of Gaul?"

"She is blushing!" cried Meg, "you've hit it!"

"Fancy you gettin' married!" gasped the Silly Billy, his mouth wide open.

"It's Richard Fairchild," said the bride-elect.

There was a united exclamation of amazement. "I thought these mighty magnates were above such human weaknesses," laughed Margaret. "I'm awfully glad, he's a nice man though we didn't quite hit it, and has plenty of the needful. Will you take me out in your carriage, lady?"

"But," said Silly Billy, "Richard Fairchild," he stopped suddenly, reddening.

"You were going to say he was younger?"

"Oh no! Only that he's quite young!" stammered the youth who invariably put his foot in it. He went hurriedly out of the room. Andrew followed laughing.

Miss Burney turned to Meg. "Well, I told him I was thirty-eight as a start, it's not so near forty as thirty-nine. But I haven't told him yet that I wear a switch. What would you do?"

Meg suppressed a laugh with some difficulty. "When he tells you all his awful secrets, tell him yours, not before," she advised.

"I shan't ask him to tell me anything," said Miss Burney decidedly, her conscience at rest.

"What's a switch?" asked a startled voice, and the Silly Billy stood in the doorway, Andrew behind him.

Miss Burney unconsciously put a quick hand to the massive coils of her hair.

"Oh, I see! I suppose all women wear them?"

"It's the silly thing you would suppose," retorted Meg crushingly, "do you think you could hold your silly tongue for half an hour?"

The youth subsided meekly.

"Now for your Paris adventures," began Meg.

"Make us blush, please," implored Andrew.

"Oh, here's Mr. Beare coming up!" Meg had flown to the door. "I am going to catch him and drag him in here. He simply shall congratulate you!" She caught Adam on the top of the stairs. "Miss Burney has returned, and she's going to be married. Isn't it jolly?"

"For whom?"

"For both of course. Come in and congratulate her. She's waiting!"

Adam Beare had never disliked Miss Burney, and he came in and shook hands with her, but he did not congratulate her on her engagement or wish her happiness. He stood against the mantelpiece when the name of the bridegroom was mentioned, and said "Umph!"

"Exactly! I knew it, as Sue-Sue would say!" retorted Meg, "and talking of the Moo-Moo——"

"Ju-Ju!" contributed Billy.

"Foo-Foo!" flung in Andrew.

"Do you still play at that idiotic game of finding new names for that woman?"

"Well, she answers to them as long as they rhyme, she has an ear for rhyme. Now and then we do think of something fresh."

"I have thought of something fresh now!" cried Billy all excitement, "Lu-Lu!"

Adam turned sharply, his mouth tightening.

Andrew laughed, and Miss Burney began. "That was the name of that notorious Paris dancer there was the big scandal about; she married a man called Ffiffe——"

Margaret dashed into the conversation. "Oh, don't," she shuddered, "she was my poor Adam's mother. It's too awful to be spoken of. Heaven knows what the end of the story will be!"

"That's just it," cried Miss Burney, "you see I saw the end; the end of both."

Something made Meg look at Adam, and she caught her breath at sight of his face. He had known this woman! What was a Paris dancer to him? The blood surged to her forehead, and hardly conscious of her own actions, she went across the room to him.

"Tell us," said Andrew eagerly, "there was nothing in the English papers."

"No; it was in some of the French ones, though. There was a little group, I went to see if it was anything for my paper. They were taking her out of the Seine. . ."

Adam turned to the speaker, seeing no one else. His face was quite white. He seemed waiting for news of the Paris dancer as if life or death hung on the issue. So there was one woman he had troubled about after all!

Margaret stumbled closer to him.

"It was the usual story," said Miss Burney, looking hard at her elegant shoes, "a woman of Montmartre, once an habituée of Maxims. After Montmartre the deluge, or rather the river! She wasn't young any longer, and the dye was running from her hair, the rouge washed from her cheeks, but there was something even yet, she must have been very lovely once. Nobody knew who she was. I was trying to get out of the press, wishing I had never got into it, when a tall, thin wreck of an Englishman forced his way through. He seemed to see nothing but the dead

woman, he dropped on his knees beside her, flung his arms around her, and cried in a voice that I shall never forget, 'Oh, Lulu, that it should have come to this. . .'

Margaret looked up at Adam, whose face was drawn and livid. He knew this woman; he had loved her.

"And then?" asked Andrew breathlessly.

"I got away. The next day it was in some of the papers, and that the Englishman's name was Ffiffe, and that he had shot himself that night."

Nobody spoke; the awful end of an awful story had touched them all.

Adam listened in an agony, knowing he was looking his last on the living shame. Suddenly he felt a nervous grip on his wrists and looked down into Meg's blazing eyes.

"What was she to you, that infamous woman?" she whispered tensely.

She hardly knew what she was saying or doing, or why she acted as she did. She only knew that something stronger than herself compelled her; that a searing hate of this dead Lulu held her. The beautiful fascinating woman of many lovers. Had this man been one? And why did it matter so much, more than anything else in the world? What chaos of mad instinct moved her?

"You knew her," she whispered accusingly, "you knew her? I can see it in your eyes."

He shook himself free of her tenacious fingers. "You are mad, girl!" he said, and left the room, his face a mask.

In his own room the mask broke up.

"There is no death," he repeated bitterly, "no death of the soul, they say; certainly no death of the past. It comes out of the grave to tell me so."

Whenever he succeeded in forgetting, the ghost of that dead thing would trail her ghastly garments across his feet. How could the memory of his parents be thrust aside when their shameful blood was in his veins, when it would be in the veins of his children and their children, tainted blood, tainted lives. For him there must never be wife and child.

"Not that I want 'em!" he muttered savagely, "not that I want 'em!" Angrily he rubbed his wrists where the long, slim fingers of Margaret seemed still to cling.

He had always felt that at any moment his mother might

drag the soiled remnant of unspeakable things across his path, his father rise from the depths to show him to what an honourable English gentleman could sink, that they would point to him and say, "You are our son; your son also is ours."

They had doomed him to harsh celibacy, robbed him of name and honour, of his very humanity, made him afraid of it. He loathed the woman he had once idolised, the name of "father" was like a blow.

Now the shameful end to shameful lives had come, and he must find out for certain that these people were indeed his parents.

He left for Paris the following day, and discovered that, at least, he had no longer anything to fear from the living.

Margaret heard of his departure and destination as she was dressing for the theatre, and suddenly decided she would not go after all.

"Running after danciers at his age!" she cried angrily, and blinked very hard at herself in the glass. "Well, it's nothing to me, and I don't care if he fills the Mansions with 'em, but he ought to be jolly well ashamed of himself, that he ought! And after the way he has pretended to be superior to all such weaknesses too!"

CHAPTER XXXIX

NEWS OF THE ORPHAN

"IT'S time he wrote!" grumbled Margaret as she opened the letter of her most erratic relative.

She read it with a smile. How gloriously, hilariously young was the absurd boy! Had she ever felt quite as young as that? It seemed a long time ago. She had been working for "fame and fortune" seven years, and it still eluded her grasp. Seven years! She was twenty-five now, feeling older, looking older, than her years. The time had gone in a flash, and her first fresh youth with it. Would the next seven years flash by in the same fashion? She would be thirty-two by then, "a regular old frump," she thought aghast.

She grew frightened, almost panic-stricken. She had mapped out things exactly, carefully, and none of them were turning out like the pattern.

"Oh, it is not fair that life should be so short, and youth still shorter!" she thought passionately, then, lest the dark mood that swept over her now and then should descend, she read O'Hara's letter over again. He at least was always cheerful, being of those who never take long views.

"Dear Spinster Aunt (she read),

"How's things with you, including Matrimonial Chances? You're getting quite old, aren't you? I, a mere nephew, was twenty-two the other day, and feel weighted down with the years. Old Phil is up, but just as I go down. He is plotting darkly how to spend many days in London, without *ma mère* twiggling. What a pity he is only a kid, for he seems quite keen on you, and if he wasn't so young, and you so dreadfully old, it mightn't be so bad to be Lady Daventry, and boot out that old cat. Take a bit of doing I fancy, but I'd back you, old girl, I do believe. However of course that's N.G., six years

on the wrong side being a bit thick, eh? But I wrote to tell you some topping news. Oh, Meg, old girl, just fancy, I'm going to earn my own living! It appears I have some Uncles O'Hara who have suddenly remembered me, now that they are elderly and unmarried. They live in Londonderry, have a wine-merchant's biz and the Nonconformist Conscience. A rum mixture: don't for goodness sake think this is an attempt at a pun, it isn't, and besides it happens to be more whisky than rum. I'd rather be an artist and have the artistic temperament, but Fate has decreed I am to be a whisky-drinker and have D.T.'s. The Uncles O'Hara are strict T. T.'s, consequently I shall have to stand the whole racket. It is against their principles to drink whisky, but not against their interest to sell it. It's 'O'Hara's Hottest,' highest and holiest, purest and best. Sounds rather like the one and only girl, not merely the one and only brand of whisky, doesn't it? As a matter of fact, I think she will accept me; it's her father that's the trouble, a retired butcher with the oof, who naturally looks 'igh' for his only daughter, 'igher' than your poor orphan, but we'll see what a year of whisky-drinking will do, though as a matter of fact it's only a three months' trial to start with. I think as long as I don't become humorous against my better judgment, I may keep the job. I shall have, I imagine, to sample the stuff all day, and when I see eight or nine uncles be civil to every one of them, but when I start seeing nineteen or so, I shall come up to London and be an artist before it is too late. So here's to our next merry meeting! Your Orphan."

"Oh dear," sighed Meg, "oh dear, unmarried uncles; it sounds so promising, but it won't last. I know Orphy too well for that; he will start doing things to the uncles."

Then she rose and stretched herself. "Well, it doesn't matter, nothing matters now that Bayliss, Jenner and Co. are going to publish my novel and it will be out quite soon. I shall have enough for the orphan as well as myself if the worst comes to the worst."

She got pencil and paper and started figuring up profits. She put the sale at one hundred thousand or so. It came to quite a nice little thing, and she started to spend it in her mind's eye. It was astonishing how little was left of the whole when she had finished. "But I shall have

had a lovely time, lots of the things I wanted, and be earning more and more all the time," she told herself, "so it isn't real extravagance."

It was, however, counting her chickens before they were hatched, for the book was a failure.

It was difficult to say just why. It was well got up, well pushed, well advertised; the season was a good one. Many books not better, in some instances much worse, by new authors did well.

That the publishers, knowing nothing of the personal importance of the date to Meg, should happen to bring it out on her twenty-fifth birthday seemed a splendid omen to her.

"The birthday present par excellence!" she cried with shining eyes to Andrew, "fame and fortune and a future!"

"You know people don't often make fortunes out of one novel, not even out of a lifetime of novel-writing," Andrew warned her a little anxiously. "Do not expect too much as a start."

"But it has been done, you must own that, and what man has done man can do, and woman too!"

"It's fatal to expect too much, I wish you wouldn't. In a publisher's office, well, one finds it isn't all romance."

"I shall invest the money and have a comfortable income," said Meg suddenly, "it'll make all the carping relations look so silly."

The title of the book was "Doctor Langrishe"; it was a study of a very noble doctor they had all loved in the Daventry days, and the scene was laid near her old home. But it was a sad story, like too many drawn from life, which do not so much end in "and they lived happily ever afterwards," as in frustration and futility. The dead doctor's life had closed in tragedy, and when it was too late it was seen what his life must have been.

It was a grim study, grey with realism, bitter with life, unleavened by humour, though Meg had humour; but there had seemed none in the history of the man she wrote of, and she would not let it intrude. It ended in an appalling tragedy, on a question without an answer: and so it failed.

The book made nothing for Margaret, and a loss for its producers. Mr. Jenner was very nice about it; the firm

was so rich that they could afford to lose on promising authors now and then. "If you will explain to me the nature of 'luck,'" he said, "I will explain to you why it is of two authors, A. and B., with little to choose between them, A. has a sensational success, B. is never heard of. The whole thing is entirely a speculation; the good work of art falls to the ground, the novel we have built every hope on hardly moves, something that is little better than rubbish, or something that we thought too good for popularity, sweeps all before it. But if you have it in you, and you have I think, go on, do better and better. Your book is not selling, others which we consider inferior ourselves are selling well. We cannot help these things. The publishers are as much the slave of the public as the authors. I have never seen more promising work than yours; some day there will be a place for it. In the meanwhile work on with a strong heart. You have the gift."

"Oh, how kind you are!" gasped Meg, "so different from relations!" She laughed a little ruefully.

Mr. Jenner laughed too. "Ah well, the prejudiced critics never count because of the personal element, and their inability to judge the work apart. They do not judge the book; they judge you. They praise blindly or blame blindly; the blame cannot hurt you, but the praise may."

"Well, there's hope for me," said Margaret, as she rose to depart, "for not a single relative has praised!"

Dosé had wanted to, but it had been difficult, insincere. She had read the book really to please Meg, not to please herself, and it bored and rather horrified her. There were things in it that she thought no woman, and above all no unmarried woman, ought to mention, or indeed to know, if she could help it, and there was practically no "love interest." People didn't get married. You put people in books to marry them after various vicissitudes and the more love scenes the better. That was why one went to the circulating library regularly.

Then there were Tom and Madge. Tom was annoyed seeing the nature of the book, and that it was a failure, that she should have written it under the name which also happened to be his. People asked him about his "authoress sister," chaffed him about her, seemed to think it a good joke. As a man of substance this was trying to his dignity;

he intimated he had "cut the girl off." "None of your disreputable Bohemians for me," was a favourite phrase of his.

"If she would give up writing silly piffle and try and get married," said Madge acidly, "there would be some sense in it. She's plain, but not too plain if she hurries up. But of course she will never get married, and goodness knows——" she ended with a shrug implying all manner of things, all of them discreditable to Meg.

Unfortunately, a friend had met Meg and been rather impressed with her. "Looks like a girl with a temperament," she had said.

It was an unlucky remark. Madge's thin lips had tightened, her thin, sharp nose grown pinched. She had not learned much of life; such natures don't, but she had learned at least this, that no "nice-minded" people have temperaments. One did not encourage temperamental people any more than one encouraged burglars; one kept away from them; they were a danger to the community as well as to themselves. Instead of controlling themselves like all the common-sense, sane people who have nothing to control, they followed that Will o' the Wisp, Desire, into whatever swamp it led them, and called it "temperament."

Oh, she had no patience with such rubbish! Thank God she was a decent, order-loving woman! She did her duty to her household, her husband, her children, and to what she was pleased to call "Society." What did a woman want more? What right had she to other worlds? She only made herself ridiculous. "Look at the suffragettes," was a favourite cry of hers, "it's husbands they really want; only they have to call it votes, of course. It sounds better." She ignored the married woman, the young and the pretty, in the movement. Then she pounced on a review cutting Meg's book to pieces. "Look, even the papers say what bosh it is! How ridiculous she's made herself!"

She agreed with all the bad reviews, and ignored the good ones. The good ones, as a matter of fact, were few and far between. The critics all went for "Doctor Langrishe" and cut it up severely. They pointed out in some instances that it was sufficiently good to be better.

Margaret, new to the pillory, did not take it particularly

well; she grew a little bitter. "Now I know what it feels like to be the toad under the harrow," she said, "and what fun it must be to be a critic. It's like a game of nine-pins, always knocking something down."

Andrew, however, would not have that. "It is the critics that build," he said. "I think they have been very hard on you, but they have not damned you with faint praise. They have been down on what they consider your faults because they think you are going to be worth it."

"They have contradicted each other, and what one has stated the sole redeeming feature, another has slated as the worst."

"Oh, come, old girl! Well, we won't talk of it! I'll bet you this though, some of these days they will be 'discovering' you for all they are worth, because they love to get hold of anything 'big.'"

"I'd rather be discovered to-day."

"One can't have everything quite at once, and a first book——"

"Quite at once! Eight years!"

"Some have served eighteen and more."

They dropped the discussion; it was wiser. Meg was apt to be a little captious those days. To begin with, she had counted on making money out of her book, and had made no money and lost all her time. She was trying to get a commission to do a serial for Fairchilds, and far from sure of that. If she did not get it——

"I seem to spend my time tramping to that infernal pawn-shop!" she exploded. "Life is a rotten business, simply rotten!"

It was nearly two years before she started another novel. "One can't afford to write novels unless one has private means," she observed cynically. She was always saying cynical, bitter things at this time. "You've got the laugh of me," she said to her aunt, "not even my own 'pet puddle' is afire!"

"All the same it was a great deal better than I expected," said Miss Lister. "I thought it quite astonishingly good."

"Only because I was your niece, fair lady, and you naturally expected something astonishingly bad. Oh dear, Fame is more illusive than I thought, a shy bird that keeps its tail well out of the way of your salt! It always

flies faster than you. If you don't want it much, it comes tame to your hand. Yes, there's no logic in fame. If you seek it through toil and tribulation, over sea and mountain, with agony, and sweat, and tears, it never comes within sight or sound. Oh, it's rum, awfully rum ! ”

“ Undoubtedly. In the meanwhile you can have that commission. I saw Richard Fairchild to-day. He wanted to talk of the baby, but I made him talk of the serial. By-the-bye, is Mr. Beare going to review ‘ Doctor Langrishe ’ ? He's taken his time about it.”

“ No,” said Meg, and changed the subject, for that was the sorest point of all. It had seemed to her that he had been deliberately cruel about her book ; that he had showed his hatred towards its writer by his attitude.

She had read it with delight when it came home from the printer's, and thought how good it was. The Bear should not have to wait for his review copy ; he should read it in page proof. The binding did not matter.

She burst into Adam's sitting-room and waved the book at him, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shining.

Adam looked at her resentfully. She was growing so attractive. She had been very long in developing, but at twenty-six she was fully matured at last. She was a long, graceful girl with rounded outlines now, a clear skin, that coloured easily, an oval face of good outline, well-dressed hair, splendid eyes, and charming clothes. She had a magnetic personality too, distinction ; wherever she went she counted. She stood out of the crowd of mediocrities at once.

Philip said she looked as a duchess ought to look, and hardly ever did, and the orphan on his brief descents, exclaimed, “ I say, what a swell you are, oh spinster aunt ! ‘ Why won't the men propose, mother, why won't the men propose ? ’ ”

She certainly looked uncommonly attractive in her excitement now, and then she was so confident ; success was just waiting round the corner. It would dash down upon her in a week or so, could not fail : even Mr. Beare would have to acknowledge that.

“ I've brought the book,” she said gaily, “ at least the book in the making, it isn't bound yet. But it's the contents that matter, not the outside, eh ? Here it is.”

He put out no hand to take it.

She pushed it at him. "Look here, I'll bet you a sovereign that you can't honestly condemn it as worthless."

"Can you afford to lose a sovereign, Miss Lister?"

"Can you? Two to one, if you like!"

"If you take my advice——"

"I seldom take advice, and never yours! Why should I? Of misfortunes entailed upon the taking of advice there is no end. Better make your own mistakes than the mistakes of other people."

He turned over a page of the novel. "Then this is quite your own mistake?"

"Alone I did it! I hope when you review it you won't be extra spiteful, because you know the author, she's a woman, and you detest her!" She made a face at him.

"Spiteful, Miss Lister?" There was a glint in his eye.

"A brick by any other name . . . is still a brick when it lays you out!"

"Oh, pah!"

"Not forgetting pish!"

"If you have got a sovereign I will accept your bet, at evens."

She put down her last gold piece as if a hoard lay behind. There was only hope and work behind, but Adam did not know that.

"I'll say au revoir and not good-bye!" she remarked with cheery optimism.

Adam slipped it into his pocket with a final air. He never doubted its destination. Then, rather pointedly, he held the door open for her exit, and locked it behind her. He was not going to have her running in and out of his rooms in the casual way she employed with young Merri-ment and his friends. She was old enough to have had more sense. She had been there seven years, and it seemed to him she had gained little in this particular, and was almost as criminally casual as ever.

It was not often Meg spent an evening alone with but her own company, but she happened to be in a thoughtful mood, and had intimated to the young men, one or two of whom often joined her for an hour or so, that she was going "to keep herself to herself," as she laughingly put it.

She thought first of the use she would make of the coming fame and fortune. "I'll have frightfully flattering photographs taken for one thing," she decided, "me as I might be, not me as I am." Then she thought of Adam as she had seen him that afternoon when she left her book with him, "he'll be awfully annoyed," and of her father, "put the pater in a bit of a hole. If he scents money in it he will want to act the 'prodigal' father in more senses than one." They were very delightful and exciting these dream castles; higher and higher she reared the fairy edifice. "He'll have to own he was wrong, Rochester!" she concluded triumphantly.

She went over the history of the eight years in London. She remembered herself at eighteen. "I was a different person then," came home to her for the first time, "there is hardly anything left of the old Meg. Is it true people change every seven years? And do they ever become somebody else? for I am somebody else. Shall I be somebody else again when I reach the thirties, and shed the old skin with each decade of age." The idea did not please her at all. She did not want the old Meg back, but she wanted the present one to last.

For almost the first time she thought about marriage in a personal sense. "Rum how I feel I'm bound to marry willy nilly in the end," she thought. "Do all girls feel like that up to a certain age, and when do they begin to doubt the inevitable destiny of woman; is it a matter of age, or does it lie deeper than that; do some know they will never marry while they are still young girls, do others feel certain they will up to almost middle age, and are they always right?"

She stood up and examined herself carefully in the glass. "Is it mostly a matter of looks?" She thought of the countless plain, dowdy, stupid wives. Then she gave up asking unanswerable questions and became personal again.

"A plain woman should always marry a plainer man," she decided. "I shall marry someone almost hideous. Nothing would persuade me to marry someone very handsome. My husband may have the Bear's big, powerful figure which he keeps so strong and active with his visits to the gym., but he mustn't have his hateful, handsome, sneering face. He must just look kind and hideous. He shall have a blobby nose and a huge, shapeless mouth just

jolly looking, and a fat chin because he'll be good-natured and easy-going, and teeny little twinkly eyes, like a good-natured pig's, and huge bat-ears sticking out, and his face will get horribly red after dinner. It will all be frightfully comforting, and he will have to live up to me, not me up to him. Yes, that's the sort of man I shall marry!"

She stared into the glass, tried to conjure up the vision her mental eyes saw so clearly, to see him side by side of her own face, to note "if we go well together," and suddenly a shape did seem to loom up dark and clear, a face also—but it was Adam's face.

She stared at him fascinated, her breath coming unevenly, her eyes dilated. Had she second sight? Had she conjured up a vision of her future destiny? A hateful, horrible, incredible destiny!

And then the figure moved, and jerked out its hands, and she saw that in one he held her book, in the other two sovereigns: it did not need his voice to make her realise how absurd she had been.

"I have brought you back your book," he began.

"Oh, what a blessed escape," she cried. "Oh, what a blessed escape! I never noticed I had left the door open, or saw you come in. I only saw you suddenly in the glass and I took you for—the devil!" She laughed almost hysterically.

"You are always so flattering," he murmured.

"Certainly the vision flattered you. You have come——"

"To bring you these." He put the book and the two sovereigns down on a table near, and turned to go.

"Oh, you think it good!" Her eyes began to shine.

He looked away. "No, not good; but not as bad as I expected."

"You will review it?"

"No; it is sufficiently good to have been so very much better. You have not fulfilled your own possibilities yet. When that day comes I will review your work. At present I can only ignore it."

"Oh, ignore it and be—be bothered!" exclaimed Meg violently.

He departed shrugging his shoulders.

Sometime later he asked, graciously enough for him, how the book was going, but Margaret did not take it kindly.

"You ask because you know it is not going!" she retorted.

"Indeed, I assure you——"

"You needn't!" Her voice cracked, and her mouth twisted. It was a bitter moment to her.

It was not pleasant for Adam; he thought she was going to cry there and then. It was the sort of thing a woman would do, and he was not going to endure it. He did not feel he could endure it. "Only a fool cries over spilt milk!" he said harshly.

"I wasn't crying," her voice shook, and she fumbled for her handkerchief. "Do you think I would cry before you?"

"I can but hope not. I cannot calculate on what you will, or will not do, Miss Lister. The stairs are rather public for emotion."

"When I want to cry I don't cry on the stairs, I cry on Andrew Merriment," cried Margaret angrily.

His face darkened. "And are these delightful exercises of frequent occurrence? Do they come into being when you get a bill too many, or a cheque too few, and so on?"

"What silly ideas you do have about women! I don't do it for fun: I only do it when I can't help it."

"Won't, not can't!" he said disagreeably. "Of course if you are going to be bowled over because you've met an obstacle on the way, you'd better give it up——"

"You know I can't give it up, it's me. I don't want to be a sky rocket coming down with a bump. Bumps make one's teeth rattle. I happen to know, because I own an orphan whom I bumped rather badly in the days of his youth, and he declares his teeth have never 'set' properly in consequence. I'm going to be a steady star."

"By all means, Miss Lister." He spoke ironically.

"Oh, have you ever said a kind or encouraging thing, done one decent, kind, or unselfish action in your life?" she burst out passionately. "Do you think it's enough to be negative? Just not to do the wrong things? To go through the world without giving a helping hand to one human soul?"

"Souls shouldn't need helping hands; they should have wings."

"Wings! When you pluck the feathers out of them, and then gibe because they can't fly!"

"Do you accuse me of plucking or clipping your Pegasus-wings?"

Margaret fled choking. "Pig! brute! icicle!"

She sobbed with her face on Luck's rough coat, and though Luck endured it, he was not very pleased. There were chops with bones in them cooking on the stove, and that was far more interesting, and surely no cause for woe.

In the name of human madness what did one want more?

As for souls, could one eat souls? Were they juicy; had they bones? They hadn't! Well, pass souls!

Life was such fun, such a glorious adventure! Such a running after one's tail in the sunshine, such an excitement! There was always something to bark at, people coming to the flat he had never seen before and possibly would not see again, to be hilariously greeted as long-lost brothers. There were the big dogs to be avoided in time, and defied from a safe distance, the little ones to be taught respect for their biggers and betters! Fun! Why, life was just one glorious thrill! And this human, this god-thing owning all that mattered, cried about it. He licked her face to remind her the chops were getting overdone.

Margaret rose, wiping her eyes. "And people say dogs have no souls!" she thought indignantly. "Why, Luck has twenty times the soul and sympathy and kindness of that brute on the other side of the passage. He would help me if he could, he tries to encourage me in his own way. Don't you, old man, eh?"

Luck barked gaily in assent. She was taking the chops out of the oven, getting bone and biscuit ready.

She had, perhaps fortunately, little time to dwell upon her disappointment; there was indeed only time for work just then if she was to get out of the pit whole. Day after day, and unfortunately, night after night, she set herself to the drudgery of the work she specially hated, and when her type-writer took to beating incessantly on every nerve of her body, causing the most exquisite torture, so that sleep or rest became impossible, she called feverishly upon Andrew Merriment to take her to some place of amusement and make her forget for an hour or two, and so physically weary that exhaustion would see to it that she slept. Late at night, or in the small grey hours, she would crawl up the

stairs which seemed interminable at such times, but without the sound of the type-writer ticking on nerve and brain till her very sanity was threatened.

She rather overdid this phase, as she had a way of overdoing so many, and one night after she had left Andrew behind and returned alone, she discovered, to her own horror, that her legs refused to support her. "I am drunk, drunk with fatigue," she thought aghast, "and I'll never get up all those stairs alone."

She had, however, to make the attempt. Andrew would not be back for another hour or so.

As she struggled painfully along, a door above opened, and Adam looked darkly down on her. "I wonder you trouble to come home at all," he said.

"Don't you?" asked Meg, gasping and hoping he would not notice how it was with her. If only her wretched legs would "stand up for her." As it was, he was quite capable of thinking her intoxicated.

"Burning the candle at both ends!" he called down. "No wonder you look a wreck! You ask for it!"

"Oh, we can't all be young and beautiful!" she returned, but the spirit had gone out of her. Two more flights, it was impossible! Why couldn't the creature go to bed and stay there?

The "creature" watched her rather ridiculous efforts for a moment or two, and then descended the stairs in a rush. He picked the amazed reveller off her feet, very much as if she had been some small, slight girl. He carried her as he would have carried a baby, as far away from himself as possible, holding her out like a battering ram.

"You'll drop me!" she gasped, terrified, making a clutch at him. "You must be mad! Put me down!"

He put her down, on her sitting-room Chesterfield, then he left the room without a word of comment one way or other, and she heard his own door shut.

"Just to show his superiority of muscle!" she thought resentfully. "I am very annoyed, very annoyed indeed."

CHAPTER XL

AN ORPHAN SEEKS HIS FORTUNE

IT happened on a day when Meg became somehow rather conscious of youth passing; she was nearer twenty-seven than twenty-six, and depressed because youth's gay feet were going not coming, and she was no nearer the goal of her ambitions. She was writing away for dear life, and the rent, when a gay and scarlet-haired figure danced into the room, and, "I've come, Spinster Aunt!" announced O'Hara cheerfully.

He was always cheerful, as he always was to go dancing through life; one whom the gods loved well, and to whom they had given a heart of eternal youth. All Life's sorrow-sisters, Tragedy, and Pain, and Bitterness, stood aside to let him go dancing by, untouched of them; all the darker, deeper things fled at his approach, and there came others singing and laughing, scattering roses, roses all the way.

A few foolish people merely called it "the Irish temperament," thereby proving how ignorant they were of that thing which holds more of tears than laughter and lightness.

Meg did not trouble to analyse; she called it "the orphan."

She flung her arms round his neck now, kissed his almost hideous face. "Oh, Orphy dear, what does this mean?" she cried.

"Twenty-nine uncles," he returned, "and I promised to return when I saw a mere nineteen. When it was ten to that, well, I knew it was time to go! Besides, no Irishman is a success in his own country, he isn't Irish enough. The capital of the world is good enough for me!" He broke into a rollicking two-step, and a music-hall whistle. "More explanations of my bold, bad past, more awful details? Just like a spinster! Well then, though I kept

seeing several uncles, I managed to be civil to every one of 'em, but when it was nineteen, I strained like a gnat after a camel, you know what I mean, and the climax arrived, when, after a hard day's bitter toil, twenty-nine uncles spoke rudely to me, and I only gave the soft answer which turneth away wrath to twenty-eight of them. The twenty-ninth was such a shadowy-looking beast, the beggar, that I took him for a delusion. And my delusion brought me here, fair maid."

"You mean . . . you did things . . . pranks . . . ? They sent you away?"

"I was up against the Nonconformist Conscience, that's all. It flattened me; it's rather a flattening thing, like a steam roller."

"You talk so much! How am I to know which is truth, which——"

"All is truth. I am no George Washington. Here's my board and lodging, turn out your spare-room, otherwise the attic, and take the orphan in and do for him." He emptied his pockets on to her table, pushed her into a chair, and placed himself at her feet, leaning his flaming head against her knee.

"Oh, Orphy!" cried Meg rather desperately, "you should have stayed on with the wine-merchant-uncle-persons. They might have made you their heir——"

"The heir of all the ages, otherwise our 'Best Brands.' Not they! They will leave it to churches as 'fire-escapes'; that's the sort they are!" (As a matter of fact O'Hara eventually came in for everything.)

"But what can you do in London?"

"Oh, I can make myself very comfortable here."

"You can make me very uncomfortable," sighed his luckless aunt, "and your love-affairs . . . there have been seven since that retired butcher's daughter."

"Eight: there was a girl on the boat: lives at Putney: going to call to-morrow. I'm a witty devil. I shall join Punch's staff, or something like that."

"You are so ignorant, so optimistic! You've got to be serious when it comes to making a living; it's an awfully serious thing. I've tried it, and I know."

"There's bill-sticking, not too serious, and rather a lark! All that paste and stuff! Can't you see irate old gentlemen

trotting for their trains unconsciously advertising tooth-paste, a lady 'wid nossings on,' and a 'toothy' smile; or a maiden aunt with . . ."

"Orphy, life isn't just a game."

"Glum old thing! Then whatever is it? Luck thinks it's a game anyway, and I agree with him, eh, old chap!" He pulled the delighted dog's ears. "Well, then there's drawing. The poor pater was an artist, and a beggar. I'm going to be a flashy illustrator and rich. I've been illustrating some of those penny 'bloods for boys' as I call 'em. Got the hang of the thing at once! Battle, murder, and sudden death, and gor-r-e. Goin' to see the 'blood editor' to-morrow. Bound to get a job. Always fall on me feet, except when you saw to it otherwise! Just count the money, will you?" He put it in her lap, fondling it. "How I worked to earn it!" he said, taking up a portion, "that represents three tasted brands of port wine, and a buzz in my head; I thought it was a wasp! That liqueurs galore, and God knows what goin' on in my innards! And that," he flicked it contemptuously, "was common or garden whisky, and devilish common or garden at that! I'll live on porridge and potatoes till I earn more. You trust your orphan, and he'll trust you. So you'll take me? Sounds like a proposal, don't it? Not that you know the sound of that, it seems, poor dear!"

Meg laughed. "You do talk such a lot, and never sense."

"Only the fool talks sense; he has to; he's trying to hide that he is a fool."

"What a nephew for a respectable aunt."

"Respectable with those eyes, Meg o' mine? I say I've got a job for you after your own heart. You shall keep me straight! What does woman ask more?"

"I've enough to do to keep myself straight," groaned Meg.

"Then the blind shall lead the blind, which after all is what it mostly amounts to, and we'll both roll in the ditch together! In the meanwhile, Sue-Sue and my bed and board!"

Sue-Sue was summoned to help, and downstairs again in the company of Mrs. Simms, had a thing or two to say about it.

"Now it's orpins an' beds to be aired!" she exclaimed violently, "orpins, I knew it! Give 'em a ninch, an' they tell yer to go to 'ell!" She seized her slipping shawl, tied it passionately across her chest, and sat staring into the fire, brooding darkly.

Mrs. Simms went on with the beer which she had earned by her day's "obligin'," and waited.

Sue-Sue gave a sardonic laugh. "Calls 'im her nevvvy, 'me nevvvy,' she says; 'a pore orpin,' say 'e! Supposin' me to be borned yesterday, Mrs. Simms."

"They were a bit h'out of h'it there, ole dear," observed Mrs. Simms with emphasis.

"Never a truer word. It's bin 'er gime all along."

"A nusbint? Yes, I 'ad that ideer meself. That old corker hupstairs now, so 'andy, an' all. Sassed 'im right h'off."

"Sass! That was 'ow she started, knowin' 'ow it takes the men. I was a sassy piece meself, when 'e first come along. 'E married me for me sass, tol' me so. When we come out of the chapel, man an' wife, 'e says to me, says 'e, 'Now no more of your sass, mind, or it's my fist you'll be 'avin', me girl.'"

"Ay, that's men," said the charwoman.

"An' she's sassed 'im proper, to 'is fice, and through 'is key'old which 'e keeps locked agin 'er, knowing wimmin. An' she 'asn't brung it horf nor never will. There's the chap soft in 'is 'ead, Silly Billy they calls 'im, an' a good nime too! She ain't brought it h'off with 'im, nor wiff Mr. Merriman, nor any of the h'others. 'Usbints 'untin' somethink croil. Now it's orpins! That's what the Manshings 'ave come down to, Mrs. Simms, since that girl an' 'er barkin' dog 'ave took up their abode 'ere, and God knows what is yet to come of it, though it won't be a nusbint for all 'er sass, that's plain seein', Mrs. Simms! There's sass an' sass, an' 'er ain't the sort to do the trick, you mark my words, Mrs. Simms!"

"Ay, there's no gettin' the better of you, Mrs. Morrison. Funny, 'ow some of these bottles seem to 'old less'n others; it's the 'ole at the bottom, I suppose; seems all 'ole, some of 'em."

Sue-Sue found a bottle with a smaller hole, and the discussion proceeded.

312 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

For a little time O'Hara, though usually on the verge of complete impecuniosity, managed by means of his lurid illustrations to pay his way. Then, as could only be expected, he fell out with his editor. He had his own version.

"I had to chuck the fellow, rude devil! It wasn't Art, you know."

Adam was disgusted at the coming of the hilarious young man, who greatly added to the noise and confusion of the top floor, and he complained to Margaret. "Callogan Mansions is no better than a bear garden!" he growled.

"Right, oh Bear!" And Meg fled laughing. At the same time she was finding O'Hara a considerable worry. She never knew what he would be doing next, and he was spending half his day with the Putney girl he had met on the boat. For him time possessed no value, and he could not realise that this was not the case with hard-working Meg. He would appear and plunge into inconsequent and idiotic conversation to which she could not always turn a deaf ear, he would whistle, and dance, and shout, while Luck flew barking round him. Then he was always getting "jobs" of the most extraordinary nature, which usually came to nothing.

One day he darted in whistling the Dead March in Saul, and announced his intention of being a "ghost."

"A literary ghost, juggins," he went on to explain. "I'm not the sort of ass that goes and makes a hole in the nearest water. Mrs. Smithers calls it being a 'secretary.' I went, I saw, I conquered! She took me to her bosom right away, metaphorically speaking that is. She said: 'I prefer to employ someone with a little talent of their own.' So I winked the other eye, then, after I had read one of her squashy effusions and got the 'style' by heart, I did a skilful imitation, and took her the result. She gets more orders than she can supply herself. Hence ghost-secretaries."

"It's abominable," cried Meg hotly, "worse than cheating at cards."

"It's easier," said O'Hara, "one gets spotted so soon at cards, no living to be made that way."

"People say there isn't a Mister, that she's flirty, flighty, foolish. Oh, don't go!"

"She ain't much of a temptation, old girl, consequently you can trust me, likewise I must be true to the girl at Putney."

In less than a month he returned with the usual tale. "Given Mrs. Smithers the boot. I wasn't ardent enough in my love passages, I mean of course my literary love passages. What evil minds you spinsters have! And there is a Mr. Smithers buried in the country, on a poultry farm. Also I have just heard Miss Brierly is looking out for a sec. You know her slightly, don't you? You can give me a character and recommendation and all that."

"She wants a woman secretary. She doesn't have men. You can't go there. She's quite young and nice looking."

"What an odd reason!" He reached for his hat and departed swiftly, forcing himself into the presence of the authoress, who had advertised for a member of her own sex, and had no intention of employing a man in that capacity. The young man had, however, stated that he came with a message from Miss Lister and was related to her.

He plunged swiftly, directly.

"I suppose you'll want to know all about my anatomy, I mean biography, first," he said to the amazed girl. "My mother ran away and married a penniless artist, rotten luck for me, wasn't it? Bad enough being an artist, but worse bein' Irish. Still it's an excuse. Will you have me?"

Miss Brierly turned pale. A mad lover who had fallen in love with her celebrity or her photograph.

The sense of his words suddenly struck O'Hara himself. "Oh, I say," he exclaimed panic-stricken, "I didn't mean proposin'! You won't clinch on to that, will you? It's typin', an' bein' a secretary an' things. I can tell lies like the very spirit of truth, and was cut out for an authoress' secretary. Meg won't recommend me because I'm a relation. Of course, one knows too much about relations ever to recommend them, the beggars!"

Miss Brierly gasped with relief. "You are Miss Lister's brother?"

"No, she's my spinster aunt, poor old girl. Rather a slump in authoresses, eh? Oh, I beg your pardon!"

"Your aunt! Then you are the same age?"

The ungallant young man would not leave it at that,

"Oh no, she's three years my senior, getting on, old Meg. I'm fairly honest for an orphan, and willin' an' that. Shall I come Friday?"

"I can't——"

"Start on Friday? Of course not! How silly of me! Asking for bad luck, ain't it? I'd be sure to break my leg or miss my bus or somethin' comin'. No, Monday's the day, we'll make it Monday. The screw's all right. Meg boards, lodges, an' washes me, you know. She wanted it to be less, but I said no, let her make her bit out of the orphan if she could, it's what orphans were designed for."

He really believed that the weekly sum he paid to his aunt, when he had it, more than covered his expenses. Meg chose that he should think so; as a matter of fact she was considerably out of pocket each week. It was not that O'Hara grudged her every penny he had; it was simply that he did not understand. He had been at Oxford with all his expenses paid, and in Ireland he had lived with his uncles. He had no idea what it cost to live, and to keep such an appetite as he possessed going.

Miss Brierly laughed, and then tried to explain that she had no possible use for his services. She never got beyond the first word.

"Silly of me!" he broke in. "Of course Monday is your washing-day! Tuesday then, shall we say nine-thirty sharp? I've got my breakfast over and the papers read by then. Good-bye, thanks awfully." He wrung her hand and was gone.

"I'm engaged," he announced proudly to Meg.

"That Putney girl! Oh, Orphy!" wailed Margaret. She had been afraid of it. She saw herself explaining to a weeping fiancée, and her irate parents, just what the orphan was and wasn't.

"You silly! A mere crude flapper! No, engaged as sec. to Miss Brierly. Give me a woman with intellect for a wife, and blue eyes."

CHAPTER XLI

PHILIP AND HIS MOTHER

MEANWHILE Philip, eagerly awaiting the day of his freedom, was marking off the weeks and months that yet stood between him and his emancipation, and finding time leaden of feet.

He felt the humiliation of his position deeply. His father had left him quite powerless, entirely at the mercy of his mother and guardian. Till he came of age she could do what she would with him, command his coming in, his going out. She could keep him short of money, give him none, deny him this and that, make him a cipher in his own house. She had not chosen to keep him short of money; his allowance had been neither extravagant nor parsimonious; it had just hit the happy mean. He had never been called upon to account for a penny of it. He did as he pleased at Oxford, had his own friends now, rooms in the Albany, and was often in London. But at Daventry he was not allowed to count, was never consulted in any particular. Lady Daventry managed everything; her agent carried out her wishes; he had no individuality or will of his own.

The hands of the heir should have been full; Lady Daventry saw to it that they were empty. He had nothing to offer Margaret yet. On his twenty-first birthday he would have everything to offer. Till that day came he would say nothing. His mother would oppose the marriage, even though she would be powerless. There were still the months of her power left, time enough to make him ridiculous in his fiancée's eyes. His allowance would be stopped, he would have to remain at Daventry. Margaret would be insulted, everything would be spoiled. And so he waited till he should be no longer dependent boy but Lord of Daventry.

316 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

His mother held him a pawn, and could face his coming-of-age with calm. Had he not been specially trained for it; what was there to go amiss? Her restless, insatiable ambition was well-nigh satisfied. Silversands was a flourishing "Hoylake" growing from year to year, bringing in vast revenues to the estates. When he came of age Philip would be one of the richest peers in Britain, with an income he could hardly hope to spend. There was only one thing left, and that seemed the easiest of all she had accomplished, to gather into her greedy maw the vast possessions of the little Baroness. The girl was small, and thin, and sickly, of no account apart from her rank and wealth, and would make an ideal daughter-in-law. She depended entirely upon Lady Daventry, had no will but hers. She would never dream of saying no to handsome Philip with his dreamy, red-brown eyes and dark auburn hair. And he would equally of course assent to the wishes of the mother who ruled him.

Yes, it was absurdly simple. She could almost have wished a harder fight.

Long ago she had forgotten, as such natures can, the sin she had sinned, not for love or passion, but for place and power. But she had not forgotten her hatred.

Perhaps, just because she was clever and strong, and seemed unconquerable, she made the mistake that those trusting in their own strength sometimes do make, she underestimated the strength of others.

Armed with love, Philip had it in him to be strong and unconquerable too. For years he had loved with worshipping boy-love the play-fellow who had stood between him and his terrible loneliness, and now, at twenty, for all his youth, it was a man's love he had to give; no dwarf, but a giant. He spent all his spare time at Margaret's flat, though his mother fancied him playing escort more often than he did to the white-faced Baroness who much preferred London to the country, and who in a sickly, peevish fashion was in love with handsome Philip.

Meg was always pleased to see Philip and to go to entertainments with him: she could not quite get it out of her head that he was "the lonely little lord" still. And he was such a dear, such an amazingly "pretty" boy! He was some two inches shorter than herself, of rather delicate

physique, and she saw him only as charming child, felt towards him only as elder sister, almost mother. She never dreamed of the passion surging hotly in the boy's heart, as he lay at her feet with his head on her knee, and she ran her fingers lightly through his hair, and asked him teasingly for a receipt for a lovely complexion and long eye-lashes. That he paled and flushed under her touch told her nothing. Phil had always changed colour at a word; it was a mere physical peculiarity.

Once he caught her hand and kissed it, but she laughed at that too; only wondering a little at the warmth of his lips.

"What an impulsive boy you are!" she said, patting his shoulder.

"You always talk of me as a boy, Meg, but I shall not be a boy much longer. In a very little time now!" He drew a long breath. Mentally he placed his mother in the Dower House, saw Margaret sweeping down the great oak stairs at Daventry, all in white like a bride; mistress of all he owned, all he was; his flowers at her breast, his jewels in her hair. He walked with her in the old-world moonlit gardens, held her in his arms, his Helen, the World's Desire, his wife. And he saw her the mother of his son.

He never doubted it would all come to pass. How could he doubt? He seemed to have been created but for this end. Surely it had been meant from the beginning of things!

For him there was only Margaret in the world; there was no room any longer for Lady Daventry. She became a shadow, whose place, when he brought his bride home, must be among the shadows. He was as ruthless in his love as ever his mother had been in her hate. On his day of days he would go to his mother and say quite simply, "Now I am master." That would be all; nothing more would be necessary. There would be the going of the present Lady Daventry, the coming of the new.

So, though mother and son sat opposite each other at meals, smiled a little, conversed a little, outwardly the best of friends, yet all the time they plotted darkly and secretly against each other, and waited to seize the victory.

Smiles, light conversation, and a gleaming, hidden sword!

318 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"You dissipated boy, London again!" she would say during his brief visits home, well-pleased that it should be so. The little Baroness would not want to be often at Daventry. Lady Daventry would be "Dowager" only in name; in all else queen as ever.

"So you accompanied Celia to the duchess's ball? I hope you didn't dance too often together, people will be talking, you know."

Judicious letters to her social acquaintances, judicious hints to the press, ensured plenty of "talk." It was in fact regarded as a private engagement to be announced at the coming-of-age festivities.

"Talking of what?" asked Philip.

"Of you and Celia; she is so sought after; the other men will be jealous."

"Oh, I like dancing with Celia, she's so light, and I don't get on well with the regular Society girls somehow. Now with Celia I needn't bother to make conversation. We just understand each other."

"Of course you do. Soon you will be of age, Philip. I hope you will marry young. It is your duty to ensure an heir for Daventry."

Philip flushed hotly. "Yes, I mean to marry young," he said at length, and a sudden joy flamed in his eyes.

"He's in love with the little fool!" thought Lady Daventry, and again had almost regret that it was so easy. "I should like to try my strength just once again," she thought. There seemed no fresh worlds left to conquer. She had but to determine upon a thing, and it came to pass. "It comes close to omnipotence," she told herself.

Aloud she spoke of other matters. "I hope you will be very happy," she said, "as happy as I was with my dear husband; such unions are ideal, and rare. There was never one disturbing word between us. May it be so with you also, Philip!"

She dropped her eyes to hide the cynicism of them. The pasty, peevish Celia a boy's ideal! The thin, sickly girl a goddess! It would be well to hurry the marriage on before he ceased to be the blind boy, and became a man with his eyes open. Of course, like most boys married in haste, he would regret it, but that did not in the least matter to his mother. It was not necessary he should be

happy; it was only necessary he should be successful. The rich husband of rank would have the rich wife of rank; their children would inherit vast possessions. The training of the children would be in her hands.

"The past was mine; the present is mine; the future will also be mine," she thought, and went on smiling at her dupe. Of course he would soon tire of his wife, silly, selfish, plain. But that did not in the least matter. He would spend his time away from Daventry in the train of other women, and that did not matter either. There would always be the one Lady Daventry that counted.

"You love her very, very much?" she asked softly, and the boy, burning and aching with his hidden passion, caught eagerly at the sympathy he longed for. It seemed his mother had guessed about Margaret, and she did not mind. She realised that he must choose for himself.

"More than my soul, more than anything in the world," he cried, "I would die for her!"

Lady Daventry gave a little start of amazement. She had put a match to a mine. Philip was seething with love. Again she conjured up the stupid, petty face of the bride-elect, and again the strange ways of the love she had never known astonished her.

"How can I be worthy of her? So great, so wonderful! How dare I hope?"

Lady Daventry touched the lover gently on the arm. Inwardly she was laughing, mocking; outwardly she was all grave sympathy. "My boy, faint heart never won fair lady. Why shouldn't you hope? You are not exactly a fright" ("as she is," she murmured to herself), "handsome husbands are rare, you know."

"If I could be big and strong instead," he cried longingly; "women like that better, I think."

Lady Daventry was heartily sick of his rhapsodies. "Why not settle it at once, dear?"

"I mean to wait till I come of age."

She pressed her handkerchief suddenly to her lips. "What difference does that make?"

"I can give her Daventry," he said simply.

She started, and the seams showed plainly across her disfigured face, standing out like great, harsh bars. "But you do that at any time, you absurd boy, and it's a great

320 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

gift. It's only a technical matter your coming-of-age ; you have always been lord of Daventry."

"Have I, mother?"

"Of course, and always must be. Nothing, nobody, can take that from you, you know."

"No," he answered, looking across at her, "nobody, or nothing, can take it from me."

Lady Daventry rose rather suddenly from the table, and in her own room her brows drew together in a frown, then she laughed. "Oh, it's just youth in love!" she thought contemptuously, and took up a book.

She had laid the train. Philip could be depended to put light to it.

Philip returned to London in the highest spirits, and finding Margaret busy, went with Celia to a big bazaar, and bought her a mass of flowers. For once the little Baroness looked neither pale nor peevish.

Then he spent a bright evening with Meg, and sympathised with her over her latest dispute with her enemy, little guessing that after Bruce, Adam was his heir. "It's hateful," he exclaimed. "I hate to think of you putting up with it. But perhaps it won't be for long."

"What do you mean?" asked Andrew very sharply. He did not care for Philip. He was altogether too "beautiful," and rich, and a peer. Those were the things that had to count. He was glad that Meg was so busy working on another novel that she had not much time for Philip.

She was hoping for a big success this time, but alas! once more were publisher and author doomed to disappointment. For months "The Aftermath" scarcely moved, then gradually the first edition was sold, and again, a month or so later, about 500 copies of the second, but that was all. That it was to sell hugely in days to come neither publisher nor author guessed, and those days were still afar off. Meg was seven-and-twenty when "The Aftermath" failed to take the world by storm, and thirty when her magnum opus was to flash from continent to continent. An utter failure, a feeble success, and a success as great as that obtained by any living writer was to be the order of her way.

Adam treated it as he had done her other. "It was not so bad," he said, "that it couldn't have been better," and he did not review it.

CHAPTER XLII

" MISFORTUNES NEVER COME SINGLY "

FIRST of all, O'Hara, who had really proved quite useful as Miss Brierly's secretary, lost his post when money happened to be specially short. For some time he had been heaving prodigious sighs, and goggling round, green eyes at his employer, and one day the climax came.

The wretched lad was so practised as a lover, that he knew every rule of the game, as well as some outside it. He was invariably in need of new friends because he was for ever losing the old, and Meg, who stood his friend through thick and thin, had her work cut out getting him out of countless scrapes. " You see, though you are mad, you are not mad enough to be shut up ! " she remarked in an exasperated moment. To Miss Brierly she said, " He will fall in love with you ; and his ardour in love is terrific. "

Now the dreaded event had happened, and O'Hara desired to talk about it to the object of his passion, and " come to an understanding. " He came and sat on the sofa by her. " Isn't it awkward ? " he asked, and edged a little closer.

" Aren't the letters finished ? " Miss Brierly returned in a matter-of-fact voice.

" I meant me havin' fallen in love with you, " groaned O'Hara, sliding farther along the sofa in her direction. " Bein' your hirelin' I can't mention it, can I, or make love to you ? " He slipped an adroit arm round her waist.

The lady struggled and remonstrated in vain.

" Awful bein' a hirelin' when you're in love. " The speaker gripped the lady tighter. " I suppose I must discharge myself. Consider it done ! Now will you marry me ? "

"Go away at once and don't be absurd! I am old enough to be your grandmother. When you are still young my hair will be grey."

"Then we'll have it tinted, what fun! I love tinted hair, art is so much more artistic than nature. Please marry me very soon. I haven't got any money save the salary you pay me, but I don't mind if you don't. What's money!" He snapped his fingers, laughed contemptuously. Certainly money never mattered to O'Hara; he did not let it. Then he horrified her by a stifling embrace, by kisses that took away her breath. She struggled away from him at length and put a table between them.

O'Hara vaulted over it, and seized her again. "It's the torment you are!" he said admiringly, "but now that we're engaged——"

"We're not. Go away at once! You must never come here again, never!"

"What, an' me your husband, or as good as!"

She fought her way out of his grasp, explained her real feelings in the matter, commanded him to go.

O'Hara groaned. "I cannot believe it, I do not believe it! Nobody ever refuses me. It's just a game you're playin'! I shall ask mornin', noon, an' night."

Then Miss Brierly got to the bell, and was forced to have the too-ardent, too-optimistic suitor more or less forcibly expelled. She wrote and apologised to Meg for the rather drastic measures she had been forced to take, and Meg came and saw her and apologised on her side for her nephew. They ended by laughing very heartily and becoming better friends than ever.

O'Hara trailed miserably down the street, thought of suicide, and then of the younger sister of the girl at Putney. He decided on the Thames, and went to Putney. Later he told Meg that he had left Miss Brierly's because she was so "unsuitable," and that henceforth he meant to live on his wits. It came, of course, to living on Meg.

Meg rather made an absent reply. She was going out to a large dinner that night, and had bought a new gown that she had no right to buy. "But it's worth it," she thought as she contemplated herself in the glass with shining eyes. Her cheeks were brightly flushed, her hair well-dressed; her exquisite neck and arms well-nigh perfect.

"Why, I am not plain after all!" she cried delighted, "or if I am often plain, I have my possibilities, and to-night, why, to-night I think I am rather beautiful!" On the strength of this wonderful discovery she went off to her dinner in the highest spirits.

She was so gay that she said a number of things that might better have been left unsaid. A quite eminent person in the literary world, if not as eminent as he thought himself, was seated in very weird attire opposite her. She knew him slightly, disliked him somewhat, but politely passed various sundries in his direction.

He scowled at her by way of thanks, looked round the restaurant for his audience, and announced, "I live almost entirely on nuts."

Margaret bent her audacious face in his direction, and her voice was rather clear and penetrating as she asked sweetly, "And can you also swing by your tail?"

There was an amused silence, a badly-stifled giggle or so, but the nutarian went on munching undisturbed. His sense of humour was kept for the foibles of others. He did not see the trend of the impertinence because he looked upon himself as a sacred person.

Then a discussion of the fashion in women's clothes and their unhappy effect upon the stout was discussed, and Meg remarked that if the prayer of ancient Greece ran "The gods keep us chaste," the prayer of modern fashion ran "The gods keep us slim." She also said of a certain peer that he "had created a nine days' sensation by marrying a lady," and a great many other things that enlivened the company, and sent her home rather pleased with herself. "Perhaps it was a bit cheap," she thought, "but then we moderns are rather cheap. It's an age of shoddy."

Adam was in the hall when she got in, and it was easy to let her cloak fall off her shoulders so that she should be revealed in all her glory. "Do you like it?" she said.

He liked it so much that he would fain have looked at the charming frock and radiant, beautiful face, for she was beautiful just then, for some time; instead he hardly looked at all. "Is it one of the latest things?" he asked indifferently, and turned to the tray of letters on the table.

Meg came and looked at them too; they were nearly

all for her. "So Dosé has condescended to write at last!" she exclaimed, seizing hold of a fat-looking letter. "About time! She hasn't been in London for months, always some excuse or other." She began hastily to skim the closely-written sheets, and suddenly she gave vent to an exclamation of startled annoyance. "How tiresome, oh, how tiresome!"

"What?" he asked. She was not looking at him now, only at the letter. She had forgotten his presence. He took in every detail of her appearance. "She's grown into a beauty," he thought, "I never saw the possibility of that!"

"Another baby!" she cried angrily.

"A boy?"

"How do I know? It isn't born yet."

"Oh!" He was rather taken aback.

"Aren't people annoying? Bruce poorer than ever, and Tubbs costing more in clothes and things! Well, Dosé wants me to go over to-morrow, and go I must. She seems rather depressed, poor dear. Thank goodness I'm not married. And I'm in such a rush just now." She was seldom anything else. "Oh, it is inconsiderate of Dosé!"

She had forgotten her audience till Adam's unaccustomed laugh rang out. "You are the very perfect egotist, Miss Lister," he said.

On the following day she went down to the outlying suburb and found her twin looking ill and anxious, and in a very low, depressed state.

She began to cry almost before Margaret had greeted her. "I'm going to die," she wept. "I have known it all along. There has been nothing but presentiment after presentiment. Some other woman will marry Bruce and ill-treat Tubbs. Oh, Meg, you will look after them, won't you? I can't bear to think of my poor boy unhappy! You will give up that tiresome, silly writing and live here? I won't mind him marrying you, much, he'd only do it out of duty. Oh, Meg, promise!"

"What rot, what frightful rot!" gasped Meg. She had gone very pale. Dosé's changed face frightened her. People did die at such times. She was appalled at the possibility of losing her twin, and almost equally appalled at the promise

Dosé would extort from her. She would come and live with the bereaved father and children, she conceded that, but she would not give up her writing, and she would not marry Bruce.

"Well, he hasn't asked you get!" said Dosé rather sharply. "And he wouldn't forget me. Even if he married you, you would not count. There has never been another woman, never could be."

Meg was silent. She had not sought matrimony, but she was the last in the world to marry where she would not count.

"Oh, what a house it will be! Everything at sixes and sevens!" wailed Dosé.

"That will be a mild way of putting it," returned Meg, "in fact I don't think I would die if I were you, Dosé. Think of Bruce with holes in his socks, and all his buttons off! They would be, you know; half the time I forget to mend my own things. Then I know nothing of economical cooking. Think of Bruce with his nose getting redder and redder, though only through indigestion!"

"Bruce's nose never gets red, even in a cold room without a fire; and he has a lovely nose!" returned Dosé indignantly.

"He has now, I grant you, but he won't have then. No nose can stand a scarlet hue. Then there's Tubbs, I shall always be forgetting to feed her." She ignored the fact that Tubbs would see to it she was not forgotten. "Dosé, it would be real selfish of you to die. Still, if you've made up your mind—and I daresay in time I could make Bruce really fond of me. After all, a live ass is better than a dead lion, being on the spot."

Dosé set her small curved mouth into lines of iron resolution. "I shan't die," she said curtly, "so you needn't—"

"Hope for the only husband I am ever likely to secure, eh? The deceased sister's relict." Margaret breathed once more. Her visit had been effective after all.

Just before she left, however, Dosé began to cry again. "Oh, it's odd how one hankers after things. I want to be back at Daventry. All these years and never a glimpse of the real country, and when I had it all around me, I

326 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

just thought it dull. Oh, I wish I could be back at Daventry now the spring is here ! ”

“ Father—— ” Margaret began.

Dosé smiled bitterly. “ Oh, he asked Tom about us, how we were getting on, you and I, and when he learned we were not getting on, he just went on washing his hands of us. ”

“ Getting on ! ” Tom had exclaimed in answer to his father’s enquiry, “ well, Dosé is on her way to the work-house, and Meg to the devil. ‘ What else did you expect ? ’ ”

Mr. Lister had not expected anything else. “ They left the home I worked to give them, against my wishes, ” he said, “ it was their own choice. Prodigal daughters, prodigal daughters ! ”

“ Do you remember the woods and the primroses ? ” asked Dosé rather piteously.

Meg winced. She remembered them too well. She also, for all her hatred of the vicarage, hankered after Daventry and the keen sea-winds.

“ We used to pick them without thinking, just to throw them away again, as children will, ” went on Dosé, “ and now I wonder if I shall ever pick primroses again. ”

A month later Meg, alone in Callogan Mansions with Adam, burst into his room without ceremony, dragging Luck with her. Her face was livid, and she had an open telegram in her hands. “ It’s twins, and Dosé is dying, ” she said curtly, “ please keep Luck till the others come in, and explain to them. I am going at once. I do not know when I shall be back, if ever. ” She did not wait for an answer, but shutting the whining dog in with Adam, fled swiftly away again.

“ So tragedy is tracking them down too, ” thought Adam Coneybeare-Fiffe.

He explained matters to the others as they drifted in. Luck found he had exchanged one mistress for some half dozen masters ; it was not such a bad exchange. One playfellow was the hilarious orphan who understood exactly what fun things were. He would be quite pleased to see Meg back ; in the meanwhile, well, the world was a gay place enough.

Meg got down to a disorganised household and a broken-hearted Bruce. The doctor had little hope to

give them. Things had gone badly from the first, and serious complications had set in. Poor Dosé after long suffering had brought a fine little girl and a small, delicate boy with great, dark, sorrowful eyes into the world. Another nurse was coming, and a famous specialist had been called in.

Days of terrible anxiety followed. Finally Dosé, though very weak, and likely to be an invalid for some months, once more took up the burden of life. Her recovery surprised her doctors; it did not so much surprise Margaret.

"I could not leave him at your mercy," gasped the young mother. "I kept thinking of what you had said. It would have been so ghastly for my poor boy, so trying for you, you poor willing dear! So I just set myself to live. And then the twins! I am so pleased and proud!" She smiled faintly.

From the very first the delicate, dark-eyed boy twined himself round the heart of both parents, and they loved him with a love exceeding that for their robust little girls. He had such need of them; his hold on life was so frail, his pathetic eyes so appealing.

The nurse shook her head when Meg spoke of him. "They'll never rear him," she said; "it isn't just his delicacy; it's the look in his eyes, a look as if he'd just been lent, not given."

Bruce, white and gaunt, in the relief at having Dosé given back from the grave, took the other misfortunes falling thick and fast upon him with calm philosophy. Dosé guessed nothing of vast bills that could never be paid as things were, of a mountain of debt and difficulty. Those restful, petted weeks were almost the happiest of her life.

Locked in his desk was a short, curt line which informed Bruce that *The Old Brigade* had changed hands, and that after a certain date there would be no further use for his services. He did not guess the greedy, ruthless hands were Lady Daventry's. It had seemed to her just the moment to strike. She had bought some of the debts also, and was pressing for payment.

"It's ruin, disgrace!" thought the most unhappy man. "I will not call it heaven's justice, for surely the God who

328 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

knows all, knows how I have paid. Because I have sown, that my children must reap ! It may be the law of nature or the devil ; never of a merciful God. Even the old man must be satisfied, surely even the woman for all her hate ! ”

He told nobody what had happened to the paper. Time enough when it could no longer be hidden, and perhaps by the date of dismissal he could get something else. He set himself to try, and he set himself to work harder than ever at his essays. Dosé, however, found he was working into the small hours, and scolded him.

“ Silly darling,” she said, “ the doctors will wait ; they are always so kind and understanding. I have thought it all out. It will be hard, but not too hard. We will put just a little by each week out of your salary and pay so much off. When I am well I can do without help in the house.”

“ Be a drudge, a slave ; that’s what my love has brought her to,” thought the man.

“ The only sort of servants we can afford are more trouble than they are worth,” went on the wife brightly, her cheek against his hand, “ they really make more work ; it will be easier without. Tubbs is old enough to be left with the babies, the ducks ! Silly boy ! Worrying when we have such a lot, and such a dear home, and each other ! ”

Bruce dare not let her see his eyes. Soon there would be no home. The pressing creditors would take it. He had had to part with his insurance policy, and he was tormented by the thought that if anything happened to him, beloved and helpless wife and children would be left, not only without a penny, but deeply in debt, and with no one to help them, since Tom Lister, who could well afford to do so, believed in helping nobody, certainly not a poor relation whom he regarded as a personal grievance. He aged daily under the strain. Then the idolised boy was always alarming them. They would not face the possibility of losing him, but they agonised over his frequent illnesses, his unbearably pathetic eyes.

Meanwhile Margaret, having secretly paid up what she could without husband or wife finding out, and being consequently very much on the wrong side herself, dreadfully behind with her work and in ill odour with her

employers in consequence, went thankfully back to Callogan Mansions, almost weeping with joy at sight of its dingy outlines. Here was home once more, work and happiness and companionship!

She waited till they would all be in to arrive, and headed by Luck, who pretended he had moped all the time of her absence, with the exception of Adam only, who was not present, they gave her a right royal welcome. Andrew said the least perhaps, but then he looked the most.

He took an early opportunity to tell her that his salary had been raised. He also slurred over the ill-doings of O'Hara.

When finally she met Adam he raised his brows at her. "So you are back again!" he observed without enthusiasm.

CHAPTER XLIII

A TWENTY-FIRST BIRTHDAY

"All honour to thee, boy, in thy new virtue! Such is the way to the stars."—VIRGIL.

PHILIP looked at Meg with sparkling, radiant eyes. "Oh, at last, at last!" he cried. "I thought it would never come. Each year seemed an eternity, but now it is only a question of weeks. Wednesday is the day, but the festivities are fixed for Thursday. I shall leave here Wednesday night. I want to spend my real coming of age with you, Meg, and then I have to see the lawyer."

"What a great day it will be!" she said smiling.

"I am looking forward to it as the happiest day of my life," he answered very low.

"As I looked forward to the publication day of my first novel, and it was an utter fiasco. Oh, Phil, may you at least have better luck than that!"

"Yes, I shall have better luck than that," he answered positively. "I think I shall have the best luck in the world."

Then Andrew came in, and Philip said no more of his coming-of-age. There was little liking between these two; and between Adam and the boy, though they but met on the stairs and never spoke, was active dislike. Adam could not forget what the boy stood for, those stealthy meetings, the first knowledge of vileness and disillusion. The meeting with the child in the perambulator in the company of Lulu, her words, her presence; all the past horror.

Physically Adam was a magnificent specimen of manhood, and he kept his muscles in perfect trim; he looked down on the merely "pretty" and effeminate boy. And Philip

was jealous of Adam's masculine perfection, so that these two with the tie of blood between were antagonists. Underneath it all were other forces at work, of which the boy, with the quick, feminine intuition, was conscious enough, if the man was, as yet, blind.

"He is so primitive, and Margaret is primitive too," thought Philip miserably. "I would be her slave, and maybe her need is a master."

"The pretty boudoir boy!" Adam would sneer.

Margaret, her chin in the air, wondered why she resented his tone so little.

"A regular crèche," he went on. "The prize is large, my Lady Daventry." He bowed, and Margaret found the gesture hateful.

Her eyes held their fires. "You can stoop to such a thought? You have the mind?" Then she laughed too, lightly, mockingly. "Oh, well," she said, "it might be worse, for him, I mean. There was Baby Nurne, and that notorious chorus girl. He did his best for her. He made her his countess, it wasn't his fault he could not make her a lady. Phil will not have to blush for me, or only to blush a little, he blushes so easily, you know." And again she laughed. This idea of Adam's was so absurd; it was amusing to countenance it. And he was so very insulting.

"Does a woman never blush for herself; must she leave it always to others?" he asked darkly.

"What questions, Rochester! Phil is so pretty and so young. He brings back to me the days when I also was young. Do men never marry to rejuvenate themselves; then why not women to whom youth matters more? What is better? Answer me that. Would you have me waste my affections on some dulled forty? All that's worth having from a middle-aged man lies in the past. The orphan comes at the opposite end, the man who can never be old, lucky, lucky orphan! Myself, I try to hit the happy mean."

"Through the medium of a boy's eyes?"

"Talking of angels, here he is."

She ran down to give the advancing boy an even more than usual warm welcome, came up the stairs with him arm-in-arm, stooped her dark head a little, so that it seemed

no higher than his. They passed Adam laughing and talking, and they looked a well-matched couple enough.

Adam kicked his door to with an irate foot.

"Only days now, Meg!" cried Philip as he went with her into her sitting-room, "only days!"

Andrew sitting on the settee looked up quickly and frowned. Were they never to be free of this boy? He was worse than a nuisance; he was a menace.

"Five days!" Philip held up his hand, laughed and counted his fingers, "and one day half-done, thank God!" The last two words were for himself. Five days and he could come to Margaret at last, at last, and come free and a man, and with full hands. Kneeling by her side he would lay all that he had, all that he was, or that she might wish him to be, at her feet. His great, red-brown eyes blazed with worship as they looked at her, and she was suddenly startled. Her careless, idle jest with Adam scarcely seemed such a jest, just then. She had supposed the more sentimental side of his love just a passing calf-love. All boys felt it for someone; all boys passed lightly through it, often and easily; it left no mark. But there had seemed more than that in his eyes.

"Such eyes express more than they feel," she told herself. "Of course, it is the silliest fancy, I need not bother. Why, he might be my son. I could not love a son better! Or differently either." Yes, she might well be ashamed of such an unworthy suspicion. "Just like him," she thought angrily of Adam, "putting horrible ideas into my head!" And she dismissed the matter from her mind.

But Andrew, watching the scene under his eyelids, was suddenly sick with jealousy and despair, and went rather hurriedly out of the room. It was life all over, he thought bitterly. The precious gift held out, and then, when one could no longer do without it, withdrawn. Eight years, but eight years wasted, futile. Scarcely nearer to-day than he had been that first day; sometimes it seemed farther off. This boy would take it all, never know what he had won, never be able to appreciate his good fortune. He would not need to work, to wait, to suffer, to win. He would hardly be conscious of victory; never conscious of battle. Such, children of a smiling fate, took lightly and for granted all the best for themselves. They were lords of creation

in actual fact, not merely in seeming. They scarcely bothered to ask; all that they sought dropped into their laps to be gathered up or ignored, just as it suited the whim of the moment. Oh, it was well to be born with a golden spoon in one's mouth, and bitter that there were not enough golden spoons to go round!

In a slow, almost sordid way, Andrew had been struggling from week to week, month to month, year to year, to gain just a trifle more money, achieve just a trifle better position; to rise surely, if slowly. He might work through all the years but he could never rise to where this boy stood by accident. Not the soldier of toil, but the pretty favoured child of fortune, would gain the guerdon. The immature boy would lay careless fingers on all the other had striven for, and with lordly condescension take Margaret to wife.

The Merry Andrew, face downwards on his bed, his smarting eyes in his pillow, did not look specially merry just then. But then he had never looked merry; that was why he had earned his absurd and unsuitable nickname. He had always been a grave young man in deadly earnest, and in love with Margaret Lister, even when there was nothing to fall in love with but a crude, plain school-girl.

Philip rose unwillingly to go, thinking of the time when he would not have to tear himself away, but to stay where his heart was. He had to go to a dinner and take in the little Baroness. They were always asked to the same dinners, and he always took her in. Lady Daventry traced his steps from house to house well pleased. How infatuated the boy was, and not only with a fool, but a plain fool!

O'Hara came in; he was bubbling with good news. Fairchild's illustrator had died suddenly. He had submitted sketches, good sketches which he really liked doing, and he had got the post.

"I shall stick to it because it isn't work, just drawin' an' fun an' things," he said truly, "a good job, and a decent screw. And now I can afford to marry, I just shan't, that's all. By-the-bye, you've got to take double for board or lodging henceforth, or I depart, see, possibly to the devil! Also all arrears, which I've kept an account of, if you haven't. I'd do down all my other relations, and be proud of it, the blighters! but I bar you, Old Meg! I've got half

a sov. left in the world. Come out and dine at Collis, and drink the health of your illustrious orphan."

As they came out of the restaurant they chanced upon rather a weary suffragette demonstration proceeding to the place of disbandment. It was headed by Miss Lister.

"Oh, look," exclaimed Meg aghast. "Orphy, I'm going for that 'bus," and she caught it swiftly. She was neither for the suffrage nor against it; she was only for that which stirred demoniacally within her.

O'Hara stayed to enjoy himself. Here was material after his own heart.

Poor Miss Lister! She was hot, tired, and exhausted. The demonstration had not been a success; it had been ignored. (She did not belong to the militant section.) Her hat was over one eye; she looked, and felt, disreputable. It was a martyrdom but a duty. In another hour the duty would be done.

Then a scarlet-haired figure waltzed up to her, waving his hat, his coat-tails flying, his eyes brimming over with mirth.

"You!" she exclaimed, very far from pleased. O'Hara complained that his relatives were seldom pleased to see him. "One thinks of relations," he remarked, "as people one is always trying to avoid, or who are always trying to avoid you."

"What a crowd, Aunt Luce!" He swung round picking out in an instant the young and pretty. "Are all these women unhappily married?" He made no effort to modulate his voice.

"Will you go away, O'Hara?"

"My dear great-aunt, when I'm a suffragent! Are the majority unhappily unmarried then?" His green eyes twinkled wickedly. "What little pleasantry have you performed to-day? Burnt a minister's house, or a minister? Got the Prime Minister anywhere?" He knew Miss Lister abhorred the measures of the militants. "Anything I can do? Something religious on a tambourine for instance? Oh, I'll help that girl over there with her banner thing!" He waltzed over to the girl in question, his taste did him credit, seized her banner and her hand. "Allow me!" he said, retaining both.

"Duty hand in hand with pleasure," he murmured, ere parting, with a final squeeze of a very dainty hand,

"Ta-ta, Aunt Luce! Down with everything!" said the graceless youth, waving hat and hand at his rather dishevelled-looking relative. "Your whiskers are hanging down behind, your hat's over your right eye, but the warders will put you straight in the sweet by and bye! Three cheers for the hunger-strikers! Rather underground than the tube!" He waltzed away out of sight.

Miss Lister gave a sigh of relief, and proceeded to headquarters with what dignity she could muster. "And to think madmen like that have votes," she exploded bitterly, "women-workers none!"

Meanwhile at Daventry preparations for the coming-of-age went on apace. It seemed to Lady Daventry the best of all auguries that the young heir left everything to her. She had decided it should be an immense affair, this official recognition of a power she determined should be only nominal. She did not often spend with prodigal extravagance, but this time she amazed her agent by the size and expense of her scheme.

"You are sure you prefer to have it on the Thursday?" she asked her son graciously. "You see it is your day, not mine. I am nobody now," she laughed easily, "it's my abdication, isn't it? There is no need for you to see the lawyer in London; he can come down here."

"I will travel down Wednesday night," he returned. He would come to Daventry engaged to Margaret. The engagement should be announced at the festivities. His visit to the lawyer was not unimportant. The power would be handed over to him, and he meant to keep it. He was looking forward to his visit to the lawyer.

"Celia? Of course she will come down for it?" asked Lady Daventry. "She will stay in the house?" She smiled at her dupe. A hint, a combined health drunk. The thing would be done.

Philip blushed, avoiding her eyes. He did not want the little Baroness to stay in the house. Suppose he succeeded in bringing Margaret down with him, as he dreamed of doing? Something told him Celia would not be pleased to stand aside when he led his bride-elect forward. She was a spoilt, exacting girl who could never bear to see another receive any attention, and could never hope for any attention for herself apart from that offered to her

336 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

rank and riches. To Philip she clung with a jealous tenacity that embarrassed the boy even though he believed it no more than the sisterly affection of his old play-fellow. Latterly she had put forth her claims just a little too crudely, never doubting she was to be Lady Daventry. Philip was anxious to shake off the gyves they were putting upon his wrists.

"She is coming to her own place, and will drive over," he said.

"As you think best, of course," said Lady Daventry, with a humility that sat oddly upon her. The slave was to fancy himself master, as many a woman's slave had done before.

"I wonder will there be any other announcement to make?" She avoided a glass as much as possible; she certainly never smiled in it. Had she once done so, she would never consciously have smiled again. She would have realised how repellent it was. Even Philip, who had never known her otherwise, could not get accustomed to it. He had always to look quickly away; to conceal a shudder. He looked quickly away now.

"It is your day, you know," she went on.

"Yes, it is my day, my day!" he echoed, and again the flame came into his eyes.

"She will stand by your side? Share your tenants' homage? It is well thought of, Philip. The British public dearly love a lord, but they love a lover too. Your popularity will be immense." She refrained from icy laughter. The bride, for a little time, would rule the infatuated bridegroom, but she would rule the bride. The little Baroness was utterly her creature.

"I do not quite know yet, mother," stammered Philip. "I shall not know till Wednesday. I hope to come back engaged, but . . ."

Lady Daventry made a swift calculation. Celia was leaving London by the 11.20 train. Then Philip meant to see her before she left. He would go to the lawyer afterwards.

Philip, however, did not see Celia on Wednesday morning. He spent several hours with the lawyer, who wondered at his inattention. Mr. Hartop, however, also thought of Philip as his mother's creature, he expected to continue

to act under her, even though, nominally, this boy was the master.

"That is all, I think," he said at length, and then suddenly he started. "Ah, no, I was forgetting this. His lordship's letter."

He expected Philip to open it there and then. It probably contained some private instructions, some private wish, and the lawyer was not above curiosity. But Philip held it idly in his fingers and looked bored. The business had seemed interminable, and exceedingly dull. The interview had lasted double the time he had calculated, and he was already overdue at Margaret's flat. She had promised to keep the day for him. He was on fire to be with her; to put the question, receive his answer; to know the prize his.

The letter could wait. He thrust it carelessly, anyhow, in his pocket, and hurried to Callogan Mansions as eager a lover as any who have made history.

At Margaret's flat a great disappointment awaited him. The young novelist was not alone, but had Dosé with her. Dosé had turned up unexpectedly, and was staying till her husband fetched her later in the day. She was looking pale and thin and anxious; the precious baby was not getting better, he was getting worse, and Dosé was worn out with nursing him and a terror she dare not face. He was just fading quietly out of existence though his parents would not realise it. Her former nurse, who was also her friend, had come for the day, and insisted on taking complete charge. She wanted the harassed mother to rest, but Dosé was too restless to keep still. Bruce was at home, and it was he who had insisted Dosé should spend the day with Margaret till he should come for her. He had not yet told her his occupation had gone. The hours he had once spent at his office were now spent in a hopeless search for employment of almost any nature. His essays were constantly returned; he could not keep his mind on what he was writing. No wonder he was little better than a nervous wreck as he waited for the final disaster. Dosé put his appearance down to anxiety for the boy.

Philip stared at her with some resentment. Why should she come to-day of all days? Why was she spoken of as

338 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"the good-looking twin"; did the fools think she could compare with Margaret?

Meg had forgotten all about Philip and his great day, till, seeing his face fall, she remembered what had been arranged. "Hail, master of Daventry!" she cried gaily, dropping him a deep curtesy. "Don't you know Dosé?"

"Of course," said Philip, and shook hands.

Dorothea looked at him curiously. He reminded her so strongly of someone she had once known. Who could it be? They had not met since the old childhood days. What a pretty boy he was, too pretty perhaps! And then suddenly her eyes lightened. "Why, you are just what Bruce used to be," she exclaimed, "your cousin Bruce, my husband."

"Am I?" said Philip, and flushed uneasily. He remembered his mother's words. This Bruce Daventry had wronged his father. He did not want to resemble him; did not imagine it likely he really did.

"Yes, he is like," cried Margaret, "now I see the likeness that always puzzled me! How odd, how awfully odd! It's being the same type, of course. The old lord was different, wasn't he? He must have been very dark, not auburn."

"And he's like baby too," went on Dosé, leaning forward. "Oh, he is awfully like baby! They might almost be brothers!" She laughed.

O'Hara danced in and up to Philip, clapped him on the back. "Don't look so glum, old son, a man only comes of age once! He grows young again in time!" They wrestled playfully together, and Philip dropped laughing and flushed on the sofa between the twins. His letter had fallen at Margaret's feet. She picked it up. Dosé leaned forward, eyeing it curiously.

O'Hara danced out again, down the stairs, into the street. They heard him through the open window executing a two-step down the pavement, his gay whistle dying away in the distance.

"Good old orphan," said Meg fondly, "always 'merry and bright'!"

"Isn't this Phil's letter?" asked Dosé holding it out.

"Oh, thanks," he took it carelessly, "the lawyer gave it me. My father left it in his charge for me to have it when I came of age——"

"Do open it," implored Meg, "it's exactly like one of my own novelettes. The hero finds he has to marry somebody, or forfeits his inheritance."

Philip laughed, and thrust a slim thumb under the flap of the envelope. "My father has no power over me," he said thankfully, "nobody has any power any longer. It can only be some wish, some advice . . ." His face shadowed. Everybody knew of the devotion of the old husband to the young wife. He had spoiled and adored her; he could deny her nothing. Was he going to ask that she should be left to reign at Daventry? The sacred wishes of the dead.

"It's the living that have got to matter, not the dead," thought the boy, and his mouth closed grimly. He must read these wishes, but he would not fulfil them if it meant the displacing of Meg.

He came to another envelope and a slip of paper. On the paper was written: "This is the truth, see you to it."

He held it out to the twins. "How odd," he said. "Oh, I say, how awfully odd!"

"Open the envelope, read the letter, if there is a letter!" cried Meg. "Oh, Phil, how can you be so little curious?"

"We will all read it," he said, "three heads are better than one, aren't they, and of course I have no secrets from you, or from your twin." He tore open the envelope; took out Bruce's wild letter. A young man had written his accusation in words of living fire. After twenty-one years they were words of flame and truth still. They leapt out of the paper, caught at the reader, would not let go—terrible words, terrible truth.

Dosé was the first to recognise the writing. She turned swiftly to the signature, read her husband's name. Her eyes shone with excitement. "At last," she cried, "justice at last! It was a lie that he cheated, stole, I have always known that it was a lie. Lord Daventry found out what a wrong he had done. He acknowledges it here, leaves his justice to you. Oh, Phil, be quick—be quick! Bruce cheat or lie, Bruce who is incapable of the smallest wrong, and the best and noblest man in the world? Oh, Phil, read it—read it!" She was shaking with impatience. Justice at last! Comfort at last! For Lord Daventry would not leave the wronged nephew a beggar. They would

have a comfortable home. Bruce should work no more, poor Bruce who was always so tired, and they would take the boy abroad when the winter came. Heaven itself was in that precious letter Philip still delayed to read!

"Why, we will all read it," he said again; "but, how strange, it's addressed to my mother . . ." his voice grew troubled.

"Read! read!" cried Dosé unheeding. That woman had always been their enemy; hadn't she known it?

Margaret turned very white; she had seen some of the words leaping out at her. She put her hand quickly over it. "Do not read it, burn it," she said.

Dosé, her eyes outraged, snatched at the letter. "Meg! Burn such a letter! Burn justice!"

Even Philip was startled. "Oh no, Meg. I must read it."

"Then not here, not here!" she stammered.

"Meg!" again Dosé had turned on her, had the letter in her hands. "Haven't I a right to read it? My husband's letter."

"Yes, of course, of course!" returned Philip quickly. But he was troubled. Something clutched at his heart; he seemed to see Meg's drawn face a long way off. He was suddenly frightened of the letter, and intensely curious.

The three heads bent over it; dilated eyes began to read, and having started, could not stop. There was no word, no sound; the end was reached at last, and still no one spoke. The three faces were grey faces, stricken, anguished faces. They sat there frozen; the thing lay beyond words.

Luck came bounding in, greeted them hilariously, pretended it was a new game. He did everything he knew to make them play with him, flew after his tail madly, and then out at the door affecting to hear a cat.

Dosé stirred. "Bruce—my husband," she said in a dreadful voice.

But Philip's voice was more dreadful still. "My mother," he said, "then what am I?"

Nobody answered.

Philip folded the fatal document mechanically, and as he was doing so the door was flung wide open, and Bruce came in, pale and breathless. "Dosé," he gasped, "the boy . . ."

Then he said no more. He had seen his own letter ; he had seen those three faces. He seemed looking back into the glass of his own youth. His living sin sat before him, side by side with Dorothea, and Dorothea knew ; they all knew. He put his hand before his eyes, reeling slightly.

Philip, love and youth, hope and joy wiped out of his face for ever, stared back at him ; this man, dupe and sinner, was his father. He had barred him out of the place of the honourable men. He had sinned and forgotten ; the payment, the punishment he had handed down. He sat very still.

Then Bruce stumbled forward, flung out his hand. "Dosé," he cried, "it is true ! You cannot forgive, I do not ask it. You are rid of me for ever if you wish." He turned to go.

Dosé did not move.

Meg looked quickly from husband to wife. It was the parting of the ways, the last act in the terrible tragedy. She had forgotten Philip. Everybody had forgotten Philip ; they left him even out of his own tragedy, the lonely little lord to the end.

Dark twin turned to fair, shook her into life. "You do not know what love means," she cried fiercely, and rose to go to Bruce.

But with Dosé the first numbness had passed. She was beginning to realise, to feel. She was the first to reach her husband, to cling to him, to kiss his shaking hands. "Oh, my dear, my dear, and I never guessed ! You have had this to bear all the years. If I had known, if I had known ! Did you doubt my love, dear one ? You should have doubted everything in the world, but never that. I cannot bear to think that for twenty-one years you have had to pay alone."

"Dosé !" It was an incredulous, almost inarticulate cry. "Oh, Dosé !"

Husband and wife went hand in hand out of the room. Margaret sank back on the couch. "Thank God !" she said very low.

"Ay, thank God," echoed Philip very bitterly, "but for what, Meg, for what ?"

"Oh, Phil, poor boy, I had forgotten you !"

342 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"Yes," he answered dully, "you had forgotten me. People often do, I find." He laughed.

She wracked her brain for comfort; she could find none. At last she said, "Only we know."

"Yes, only we, only I!" He laughed again. He thought of all he had meant to bring this beloved woman: of what there was left to bring. Never that for Margaret Lister! So where there was to have been speech, there was only silence.

"We must forget; we will forget! We can do nothing now; you can do nothing."

"I will see to it, Meg," he answered, "I will see to justice."

She thought he meant money; it was right, Bruce should have money. "Yes, dear, you will see to it; I know that," she answered.

Then he turned to her blindly, and for the first time as a man, and the last, put his arms round her, and laid his head on her breast. "And this is what I have been waiting for all these years," he said, "this is the day I counted on, my day!"

Margaret could only stroke his hair. She was crying too hard to speak. She understood his agony, his shame, his terrible dilemma. What was he, as an honourable man, to do? Should he publish the story and the documents, stand aside for Bruce? Drag his mother's honour, the honour of father and reputed father, through the mire? What a scandal for the press! Proclaim himself bastard, reveal the past of the new Lord Daventry? Or for ever hold his peace, and for the sake of a great name continue to enjoy a heritage that was not his? Oh, it was horrible, horrible!

Her dark head went down on his, the tears ran into his hair.

His arms tightened painfully round her, and she wondered at the strength of his clasp. "Poor, lonely little Philip! What a heritage!"

"We must forget it," she said again at last, "burn the letter and forget. It is the only thing to be done."

He answered as he had answered before: "Leave it to me. I will see to it, Meg."

He lifted his changed unyouthful face, he was "pretty

A TWENTY-FIRST BIRTHDAY 343

Philip" no longer, and looked long and hauntingly into her reddened eyes. Then he dragged her head down and kissed her repeatedly with a passion that tore at her heart. She knew then. And she could not help him; she could do nothing. He must bear this thing alone.

"Good-bye, my dearest dear," he said, "good-bye," and passed out of the room and out of her life; a lonely little figure perhaps, and yet, somehow, a great figure too.

It was the last she was ever to see of Philip, eleventh Lord Daventry.

CHAPTER XLIV

HOW PHILIP "SAW TO IT"

"Like ships that sailed for sunny isles,
But never came to shore."—HERVEY.

WHEN Lady Daventry was informed that the motor-car had returned from the station without the heir, her first feeling was one of deep annoyance.

"The tiresome, careless boy must have missed the night train," she thought, "and he won't be here until after lunch."

The affair was to start at twelve with speeches and so on. Then at about one the long luncheon tables under the trees would be filled with the hungry guests. At three there would be sports and handsome prizes for the winners. At six another big meal, then last of all the lighting up of the grounds which were to be gaily illuminated, and dancing up to the small hours on carpets stretched on the big lawns. Everything had been thought of, everything arranged for, save the non-appearance of the "Hamlet" of the piece.

As Lady Daventry thought over the situation, annoyance was succeeded by another feeling. This carelessness, this discourtesy to his tenants and guests, would make Philip unpopular; and she wished him to be unpopular. People would realise how little his home and his people counted with him; how little he could count with them. She was glad he had missed his train. She sent for the agent, that meek obedient servant, and explained. "The fête had better start as arranged," she said, "we will have the speeches after lunch, not before. It is rather tiresome, but it can't be helped."

She sent a message to Celia to ask if she had seen Philip

on the Wednesday. Celia wrote that she had asked Philip to come and see her off at the station, and he had sent word that he had had to go to the lawyers but looked forward to seeing her on Thursday.

"Then he hasn't proposed yet," thought Lady Daventry, "it is very odd that such an ardent lover could miss the train." She had a momentary fear that something had gone very much amiss; a month since he had had a very bad attack of influenza; could he have been taken ill again? She telegraphed to his rooms, but received no answer. He must of course have left.

Then, shortly after two, as she sat in her boudoir, there came the whirr of the motor, and she had a glimpse of Philip in it. She gave a sigh of relief.

Celia had also seen the motor pass with its occupant, and not till it had gone did she order her own round.

Philip had driven quickly through a cheering crowd, bowing, smiling, taking off his hat mechanically. He passed too quickly for many to notice how exceedingly ill he looked.

He came straight to his mother's room and shut the door behind him, and as she looked up into his terrible eyes, the seams on her face swelled into great weals, and red blotches came and went.

She knew now why Philip was late, and that her secret sin was a secret no longer; she did not know how he had learned this thing, neither did she care.

Without a word Philip put the brief words of the dead man, the terrible letter of the living, before her.

His eyes compelled her to read them. She read them, but it was her husband's dead message that held her longest. "He knew," she whispered, and suddenly she put her hands to her maimed face.

She had gone secure twenty-one years for this! As the dying hand had struck, so also struck the dead hand. All that she had sinned and plotted and suffered for, swept away in the twinkling of an eye, all the fruits wrested from her in the hour of victory!

She had believed she knew her son; now she realised she had never known him. Where was the slave, the dupe, the weakling? Who this stern judge and master? She had done with men what she would all the days of her

346 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

life ; but with this child of her sin she could do nothing. She could recognise defeat when she saw it. She saw herself fleeing from her dishonour ; she saw Bruce step over the threshold, his wife by his side.

She looked down quickly at the documents, pulled herself together. These were the only proofs, if proofs they could be called. Would they hold good in a court of law ? She doubted it. At least they need not remain to menace her. Her strong evil hands tore them swiftly into fragments ; she put them in the grate, set a match to them. In a moment no "evidence" was left.

Philip made no motion to stop her.

She waved her hands triumphantly. "They are done with," she said.

"You have not burnt the sin and the wrong with them," he returned. "I had no intention of making any public use of those horrible things. Justice must come more cleanly than that. I cannot drag the name of Daventry in the mire."

"You are right," said his mother, "we will pay Bruce Daventry." That would be bad, but it would not be the worst. The estate could make him rich without much loss. She put out her hand. "We can satisfy that man, and we can forget. It is a very old story now, Philip."

He stepped back quickly from touch of her. "You have neither conscience nor shame," he said.

"Nobody need ever know," she returned.

"Is it always the knowledge that matters, and never the fact ?" he asked. "But I see it is to such as you. I did not know there were such women. Mother, all my life you have been taking things from me ; my freedom, companionship, happiness ; need you have taken my honour too ? Always loneliness, and now infamy. The day of my hope, the day of my love, all, all gone, there !" He pointed to the blackened ashes in the grate.

"Philip, this is morbid and ridiculous. The past is done with ; the present yours."

"And the future ?" His laugh made her draw a quick breath. "Is the future also mine ? Haven't you taken that too ? What have you left me, I ask you that ? What of my wife, my beloved ? You stand for ever

between. And your sin! Was ever such a sin? If your wantonness had brought me life, poisoned life, it would have been very terrible, though far less terrible than this. Through passion, I could have understood. Such things will be. From love I could have pitied and honoured you still, blaming only that other that his love should have been weak and selfish, not great and noble," he paused suddenly. He seemed to feel Margaret's tears running into his hair, the stir of her lips beneath his. She would never come down the stairs as bride and mistress now; never wander with her lord in a moonlit scented garden, never bring an heir to Daventry. His spirit rose in passionate revolt; it seemed to him that the burden was greater than he could bear.

"Oh, your sin was against belief, against nature itself!" he cried out.

"It has given you all this," returned Lady Daventry, "and the secret is just yours and mine. But for an unlucky accident you need never have known."

"I thank God I do know, because it seems that only I can pay. But for that letter I should have joined my shameful being to another. It came in time to save that." He did not know that Margaret would never have married him.

"Celia knows nothing; she only wants you. Philip, don't be a fool."

"I was talking of Margaret Lister," he returned icily, "it has always been Margaret Lister, never Celia."

"You must be mad, that woman! Common, ugly, dowdy."

His eyes silenced her. "You will not speak of Margaret; you will not speak of any honourable woman."

"I would never have permitted it."

"You would never have had anything to do with it. She would have reigned here. At her bidding alone you would have crossed the threshold."

She put her hands to her throat. "You would have forced me into the Dower House. Don't you know there is nothing, nobody that will compel me to go there?"

"I think there is something, mother," he returned.

"You have tricked me, duped me, you! It is incredible! You will get over this. That woman played

348 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

her cards well ; she must be clever," she spoke with a certain grudging admiration of the girl she hated, "for she had nothing else. It is a boy's madness, you will forget it in a year. Celia can bide her time, she's of the women who have to wait the pleasure of men." She laughed harshly.

"I shall have no wife," he answered, "even the vilest would be too good for such a vile woman's son."

Lady Daventry shrugged her shoulders. How youth raved, and how quickly it forgot ! The people were gathering in a great crowd before the windows. They were waiting for the heir. A cheer floated up to them. She stood looking down, smiling graciously. They saw her and the cheer swelled into a great note. She was master ; the boy was but the figure-head.

"You must really go," she said pointing, "the people have waited over two hours already for you."

"I'm afraid they will have to wait just a little longer," he returned, and passed out of the room, closing the door softly behind him. She heard him go to his own room.

"How tiresome," she thought, tapping impatiently with her foot, "how very tiresome !" She gathered up the folds of her exquisite white lace gown, and prepared to descend. She would tell the agent there would be no speeches, that Philip was ill, his appearance would bear her out, that she feared a relapse after influenza. They all knew how bad he had been.

For a few moments she stood thinking how to control the situation, still keep the power ; then she moved to the door.

As she opened it, a shot rang out from Philip's room close by. She ran swiftly down the passage. Her first thought was for appearances. That she would be the first to hear, the first to reach Philip ; that she must be very quick. She was not quite quick enough.

She had expected to find his door locked, but it yielded readily. She passed inside, her lace skirts floating round her ; if her face was grey, it was resolute. Philip lay in a little pool of blood ; as she stooped over him he breathed his last. She stifled the screams that rose to her throat. She had feared injury ; she had not expected death. Now she knew what he had meant when he said

there was something that would compel her to go to the Dower House; this was the something. Beyond death there is no appeal. She saw the acrid indignity of her future, she saw Bruce, Lord Daventry, stepping over the threshold of the heritage she had dared so much to hold. And her hands worked, and twice she screamed shrilly.

The butler came running, breathless. "Oh, my lady, my lady, I thought I heard a shot. Oh, my God, my God!" He wrung his hands, gazing down on the terrible sight before him.

"Hush, Perkins." Lady Daventry was herself again, she waved him imperiously from the room, locked the door and gave him the key to keep. "His lordship came home delirious with illness," she said steadily, "he shot himself. I do not wish anything to be known till the people have been sent away. Then we must have the doctor and all the formalities."

Meanwhile the agent was waiting with impatience for the dilatory heir to put in an appearance. He was taking his time about it, the people were not very pleased, and no wonder. He wished Lady Daventry would come. The situation was getting difficult. He felt rather ridiculous standing just inside the hall waiting till the chief actor should appear, the door be flung wide.

"At last," he breathed thankfully, for Lady Daventry was coming down the stairs and he never doubted that her son followed. He made a gesture and the door was flung open. There was a loud cheer; the little Baroness stepped across the threshold smiling. She had a birthday offering in her hand.

Mr. Harty started as the grey figure of his employer drew near; his eyes fell to her feet, and he saw a hem sodden with red. He stared puzzled, alarmed; there was still no sign of the heir. There was a note of impatience in the cheers now.

He went quickly to the stairs. "Where is Lord Daventry?" he asked breathlessly, "the people are very impatient. They will not wait much longer."

"They must not wait at all," said Lady Daventry with terrible, icy calm, "Lord Daventry is dead."

The little Baroness reeled up to them. Her small, flat figure, tricked out in gala attire, seemed more insignificant

350 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

even than usual. Her tiny face was working absurdly, her thin hands clawed the air ; she looked like a marionette jerking on strings ; just a plain little toy that did not count, never had counted, never would. But her emotions were not toy emotions just then.

She went straight to Lady Daventry, accused her. " You who could do so much," she said, " why did you let Philip die ? "

Then she fell in a huddled little heap at Lady Daventry's feet, and Lady Daventry, looking down on her, and remembering she had no further use for her in the scheme of things, signed to a footman. " Carry her ladyship into the morning-room," she said, " and send for her maid and a doctor." And she too turned to go.

Slowly the agent came out of his horror and stupefaction, and grasped the situation. He went down the steps and held up his hand, his face very grave. " I must ask you all to go quietly home," he said, " there can be no more festivities. His lordship is dead."

Then he came back, and the big door clanged to. Philip's " day " was over.

CHAPTER XLV

BRUCE, TWELFTH LORD DAVENTRY

"Again I stand in the Northland,
But in silence and in shame . . ."—*Thora*.

BRUCE and Dosé, worn out with long hours of watching, with grief bravely borne for the sake of the other, stood by the side of their boy's cot, looking down on the waxen little face. The beautiful bright hair of the dead child struck a note of incongruity, for it was aflame with life.

"The sins of the fathers upon the children," murmured Bruce brokenly, "so some would say. Dosé, is this my deed, is this part of the never-ending punishment?"

"Oh no, oh no!" she caught his hand, "never say such a thing, never think such a thing, my dear!"

"One scarcely knows what to think or say," he replied, "come, my poor darling," he drew her softly away from a sight that was breaking both their hearts, down the stairs to the deserted little drawing-room.

As they reached the tiny hall, a short, stout, important-looking man was being admitted. He looked at them quickly, his eyes shrewd. He did not know he had come to a house of mourning; the blinds were not yet drawn down. The parents had not thought of it; the servant did not know the child had passed away, though she knew he was dying. This fussy little man saw only two things, that the place was very mean and poor, its occupants obviously "down on their luck." He rubbed his hands well-pleased; he was kind-hearted enough, and he liked to think of the delight and surprise his joyful tidings would bring into those haggard faces.

He stepped quickly in front of them. "My lord," he began importantly, "I have the honour to inform you

that your cousin is dead, and that you are now Lord Daventry."

Then Dosé, who had borne so much, found she could bear no more. And suddenly she buried her face in her hands—and laughed.

The tragic end of Lord Daventry filled the papers. The affair was everywhere discussed and commented upon; it was almost more than a nine days' wonder. Of course there were the usual whispers, the usual slanders. A young man in the pride of possession did not shoot himself for nothing. As for influenza, well, nobody believed that.

Adam did not believe it. He stopped Margaret on the stairs, looked down on her white, drawn face and reddened eyes. "Are you in this?" he asked, almost roughly. "Did you refuse that boy? Did the poor fool rush out of the world because he could not have the woman he wanted in it?"

"You can insult me; you shall not insult the dead," she replied furiously. "I had nothing to do with it. Phil was a hero."

"A hero who played a coward's part. We don't throw up the fight, we fight on, when we are heroes."

"You cannot understand," she answered coldly.

"Can I not, Miss Lister?"

"You do not know what Phil had to face; you never can know or guess. He looked on his death as reparation. I can say no more than that. If you had ever suffered, ever faced shame," her voice choked; "oh, you are incapable of understanding!"

"Am I, am I!"

"You know you are. Sometimes there is no way out. But we will not talk of it. I cannot bear to talk of it. You, who say environment does not matter, would only say all the lonely years do not matter either; that secret wrong does not matter because it is secret."

Adam stared over her head. So the boy had found out! How? Who else knew? To him it seemed a mad act of mistaken chivalry. Why should he make room for the father who had wronged him?

"I did not say environment did not matter," he returned mildly. "I said, I think, that we ought not to let it matter

too much. The weak seeks sympathy, but the strong the remedy. And there is always the remedy, always the way out."

"For a man perhaps; not always for a woman."

"Not for a weak woman, but for a strong——"

"Well, it does not matter, nothing matters now. Such a gorgeous day, air like wine, the sun all gold, and at Daventry the birds singing, the flowers blazing, the sea dancing, and Phil shut away from it all, never to see sky or sea again, because he took the burden of another upon him, saw but the one way out. Too late for me to do anything now, to have cared more, thought more; too late for everything. I cannot bear it, I tell you I cannot bear it!"

Adam did not answer for a long time, and then his voice had a note she had never heard in it before. "There are things far worse than death," he said.

"I know. Sometimes I think that one of them is life."

"You are being morbid now; that is not like you. The dead have passed, our tears can avail them nothing; the duty of the living is to the living. You have your place in the procession; march on." His voice grew commonplace. "So your sister will be Lady Daventry. Are you not glad to think of her at ease?"

"The baby is dead," she returned.

"They have two others, there may be another son. Come, Miss Lister, look at things clearly."

Margaret struggled with her self-control, held to it fiercely; because it was all so sad and she wanted to cry, she laughed, though in a queer, shaky fashion. "Yes," she said, "Dosé will be Lady Daventry. It'll be rather a knock-out for the pater."

It was however nothing of the sort. The Reverend Mr. Lister performed his volte face gracefully and easily enough. He dressed himself as he thought the father of a British peeress ought to be dressed, and prided himself upon looking his part. He certainly looked young and smart. He told the ex-lady-help rather brutally that she could never even look like the step-mother of a peeress, and had better stay at home in the background. Then he started gaily for the station, very conscious of his own importance. He had always expressed by the raising of his hat the right amount of worldly deference for his

354 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

parishioners ; now he expressed the right amount of deference for himself. Lady Daventry had felt her consciousness of being only the Dowager in Mr. Lister's lifted hat.

As his pale daughter stepped out of the train he was upon her, had swept her into his arms. " Dosé, my darling, my dear, dear daughter," he exclaimed emotionally, " I always knew you would come back to your poor old father in the end ! "

Then he would have turned to Bruce, but Bruce, his eyes flaming in his white face, received the graceful little speech in silence, and took Dosé out of her father's arms. He saw nothing humorous in the situation. It was a long time since he had seen humour in anything. He only knew what Mr. Lister was, and how he had treated Dosé, and would have continued to treat her, had she remained poor and obscure.

" The poor child is looking very changed and ill," said the fond father aside, after he had made his speech of welcome to his son-in-law, " but so much trouble, the loss of your son and heir, dreadful, dreadful ; but time, my dear fellow, time, and submission to God's will," and then fussily to a porter, " Have you got her ladyship's bag, my good fellow ? "

Such, in a time of bitter stress, was the home-coming to Daventry.

In the little country places where the same families remain, memories are long. It was not forgotten that Bruce had left in dishonour twenty-one years back, but it was remembered that nothing had ever been proved, and that he was now Lord Daventry.

" Why be hard just because he is rich and a peer ? " said a certain lady whose utterances often puzzled their hearers. " He has a beautiful face, I think, and it was all so long ago. "

" But Lady Daventry will not meet them, will have nothing to do with them. "

" Lady Daventry is merely the Dowager now," the other returned, " and it will matter more to her, I imagine, than to them, that there is to be enmity in place of friendship. She loved the castle ; now she will never be able to cross the threshold. "

BRUCE, TWELFTH LORD DAVENTRY 355

But to Bruce, nerve-racked, torture-worn, it seemed that Lady Daventry crossed the threshold when, and how, she would, and that it was not he who owned this heritage, but a woman, a dead boy, and the shadow of a great sin. He moved a haunted man among haunted memories, and yet he loved his home, and even though now and then Dosé and he left it, yet always they longed to return, for its insistent claim was upon them. Horrible things seemed to lurk in its shadows still, but Duty was there and Love was there. So they always came back in the end, and Bruce fought hard to raise the banner of the ideal once more. All in sorrow, all in need, came to these two who had borne so much, and never came in vain. Bruce and his wife had suffered too much to lack understanding. Lady Daventry had been admired and respected, but they were beloved.

It should have been peace, but it was not all peace. Bruce, broken on the wheel, was super-sensitive. Sometimes when he passed down the stately passages, or sat within the rooms of the castle, the subtle perfume used by the old man's wife seemed to cling about him. He would remember her then.

At the end of the drive there stood the agent's house, and he could not always pass it quickly. His feet would lag, a great silence would sweep up to him, and then out of the shadows there would seem to steal a slight form, a woman's skirts would swish over the grass towards him, something more snake than woman come out of the woods. And again he would remember.

Once he had fled in sheer panic, it was before he had been away and returned in saner mood, but light, swift feet kept pace with him, outran him easily; she had conquered then, she conquered now. But she could not conquer for long, for there was Dosé. He would go to her with his shamed and haunted eyes, and she would hold his hands, and scold him lovingly, and say that he must control his nerves, not allow his nerves to control him. He always promised.

It was unfortunate he could go nowhere without passing the Dower House which guarded the cross-roads, and that, no matter how he might hurry, in car, or on horseback, there was always that mocking travesty in the window,

356 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

the gold head and the grey face. Its seamed mask stared out at him with scorn and bitter hate. Twenty-one years had not killed her searing hate; it had strengthened it. No, it was not easy to forget when the ghost of the woman was in his house, and the live woman at his gates, clinging desperately, as many do, to the scene of her triumphs and her sin. She was still rooted in Daventry.

He would pass quickly, yet never quickly enough; afar off he could see the flight of the swallows as they swooped low over the vault where his two sons lay.

And again memory stirred fiercely, unsleeping.

There came the day when he waited for Dosé in the hall. He heard a door bang, looked up sharply, there was a soft rustle on the stairs. He smiled happily, but his smile was frozen, for out of the shadows stepped not Dosé, but that other, and she was leaning on her husband's arm, triumph on her perfect face. But the old man looked straight at him with terrible eyes.

A few moments later, Dosé descending, found him ashen of face, trembling of limb. He fell on his knees by her, stammering his story, and Dosé drew his head to her breast.

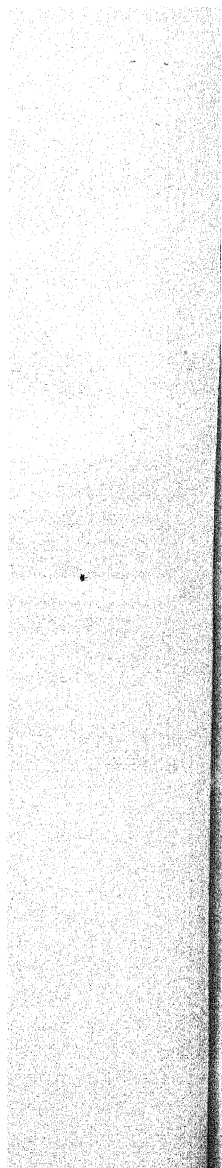
"We will consult a nerve specialist," she said firmly, "and we will go abroad for a year. The babies will be all right without us. We never had a real honeymoon, we will have one now. You shall buy me things," she laughed creditably, "we will waste our substance in riotous purchases in all the kingdoms of the earth."

When they returned a year later, the shadow had passed, Bruce was himself again, quietly happy and at peace, and Dosé was lovelier than ever, and sometimes she sang when she came down the stairs at Daventry.

BOOK III

THREE YEARS LATER. MARGARET LISTER :
HUSBAND HUNTER

I prayed for glory, and I heard my name
Sung by sweet children and by hoary men,
But ah ! the hurts—the hurts that came with fame!
I was not happy then.—E. W. WILCOX.



CHAPTER XLVI

FAME AND FORTUNE

MARGARET LISTER was thirty years old when her "Soldiers of Misfortune" appeared, to take the world by storm. The book brought her great literary fame, and a large sum of money. If she refrained from "cutting her own throat" as so many writers do, she was established for life.

She did not mention this book to Adam, or take it to him, as she had done her two previous ventures, for criticism. He was compelled to mention it himself. "So you have a new novel coming out," he said.

"Yes," she answered carelessly, and changed the subject.

Therefore Adam awaited the appearance of the book with some curiosity. A mere woman's novel! One knew what that meant too well. She had not hurried over it, and that was something in its favour. Over three years had gone to its making.

As a matter of fact all the years of her life, consciously or unconsciously, had gone to it. It had been there all the time, only she had not known it. For it she had suffered and endured. For it she had been living at high pressure, always ruthlessly seeking to tear the red heart out of life. For it she had sacrificed leisure and comfort, been deaf to other insistent voices. The spring had called, and the passionate spring of her own youth answered it. The primroses in the far off woods had haunted her, the siren song of the sea sought to draw her to itself. In London the wind was dust-laden, smelt of motor-buses, but it showed itself to her playing with the bright green petticoats of waking, vibrant earth, quickening the pulse of the sea beating on golden shores. And she had shut longing eyes and ears, and would not see or hear. Rest was for afterwards. She had flung aside the glorious,

360 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

certain present for the fame and fortune of the morrow; had she missed this goal, had she failed, all her sacrifices would have been worse than of no avail. She knew she risked it, but she had set her teeth to endurance.

When victory came, Tom Lister was the first to say, "How easy!"

While Madge, her sharp nose more pinched than ever, had her sneer ready. "Perhaps she will even be able to get married now."

How that book had gripped her from the first! Her pen seemed made of magic, winged words flew from it, formed into a melody, a burning fire, a breaking battle. Inspiration galloping past caught her up with a gay laugh, they dashed through the pages together, and life was in them.

Adam picked it out of the copies waiting for review. He read the first pages with an interest that he resented, and he never put it down till he had read to the last. Then, very softly, he exclaimed, "Good God!"

His standard was high, too high for most, but he was a just man, and he knew Margaret had come right up to it, and more. She was a woman, and not very old, though she thought herself so, but she had written a great book.

If only he had been given this power! How jealously he would have guarded it! Instead it had been flung away on a woman, a reckless, passionate woman, he knew she was that, whether she realised it herself or not, and she would not guard it as a man would do. She would be more easily influenced by outside matters. Human love might steal it from her, because she would make human love something more than a mere incident. Marriage and motherhood might weaken its hold on her, because her genius was for living and feeling as well as for writing.

He went and knocked at Margaret's door. "I've read your book," he said gruffly.

If Margaret were anxious as to his verdict, she did not show it; she laughed with an ease that did her credit.

"I am going to write an appreciation of it for next week," he said in his most disagreeable manner.

Margaret caught her breath at that, and her eyes began to shine. "You cannot mean it!" she cried. "An appreciation! I only hoped you would review a book of mine at length, and not be too severe."

When Adam was generous he outdid generosity. "An appreciation is the lesser impertinence," he said grimly, "this thing lies beyond criticism and above praise. It is genius. Mind that you guard it well, Miss Lister," and he retired without another word.

Andrew was the first to be told the great news. "Well, why not?" he frowned, "it's the least he could do, I think. Meg, he's a cold, inhuman brute. To dash oneself against his will is to dash oneself against the rocks, to be bruised to death."

She looked at him startled. "Why do you speak to me like that, Andrew?"

"Because I am afraid for you," he answered very low, "sometimes I think I know you better than you know yourself."

"Then you know that I hate that man. Is that what you are afraid of, hatred; and why? What harm can Rochester do me? His bark is worse than his bite."

"He cannot harm you, it is not that; it is that you will harm yourself. You have let that man into your life, you should have kept him outside altogether. Men like that are better kept outside by women like you."

"You think I shall come to lay myself humbly at his feet and beg him trample on me, like Jane Eyre. Oh, Andrew, how awfully funny!" She could hardly stop laughing.

Andrew got up and paced the floor. "It is not funny to me," he said, "it is horrible." He went rather abruptly from the room, and Meg looked thoughtful and sighed. "Poor, dear old Andrew," she said, "I wish he didn't..."

Her success grew and grew; she was the rage of the year, and it must be confessed she enjoyed it. "I've rather lost my breath," she confessed to Adam.

"Your breath, or your head, or both?"

"One's too old at thirty to lose one's head, specially after work so long and hard."

"So it's come to rubies." He looked where they blazed like red fires in her dark hair, but he avoided the eyes where they sparkled too. "I suppose now you will be leaving here. Callogan Mansions is suitable for the striver and the struggler, but for the arrived celebrity it is out of the

question. You will have a house?" He looked at her hopefully.

"Because it is suitable?" Her eyes were mocking. "I think I shall stay here just because it is entirely unsuitable, in your eyes. Oh, you are not free of me yet, Bear!" She curtsied and fled laughing.

CHAPTER XLVII

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

"I hate and I love...and I am tormented accordingly."—CATULLUS.

"IT'S something to have the world before one at thirty," thought Meg. For her contemporaries it lay behind. She had achieved so much that it seemed impossible to suppose she would not achieve more.

"At thirty," she went on—she was talking to her aunt—"one should be settled for life, or unsettled for life. And I am neither. By settled I mean the average woman is married with romance behind, a more or less nice or interesting husband, a child or so. I daresay they are happy enough, and yet sometimes they must feel rather dull, remembering there is nothing further to happen. For the unsettled nothing has happened, and they are beginning to be fearful if anything ever will. Then their future is more appalling still. Just dependent spinsterhood in their parents' houses. The fate of the average woman without independent means, which is bad, or independent brains, which is worse, is not pretty to contemplate. They snatch eagerly at almost any chance of marriage, and if they do not snatch, or there is nothing for them to snatch, and quite often there is nothing, they become, only too many of them, the superfluous women, discontented, useless. Oh, the gods have been good to me, very very good to me! I have everything I want, everything!"

"Are you going to marry?" demanded Miss Lister bluntly. "Take the tide at the full then, Meg. You can marry well now; you mightn't be able to to-morrow. Now is the accepted time!" She laughed and got up.

364 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"Oh, I shall marry some time or other," returned Meg carelessly, "one does in the end, I suppose."

"Some time is no time," warned her aunt.

"The fight has been such fun," went on Margaret, dismissing the question of matrimony as uninteresting, "you've no idea how grim the fight was, wasn't it, Luck?" She seized the dog by its forepaws and made him waltz round with her. "The world of chance, the world of change, the world of fierce endeavour, the best of all the worlds! There seems nothing left to fight for. Oh, the husband? Well, Aunt Luce, when you want something to laugh at, think of me struggling for a husband, struggling hard, tooth and nail! When the wedding-bells ring say to yourself 'It's dogged as done it!' and 'poor brute!' too, if you like!" She put Luck down on his back and played with him till both were breathless.

"Marriage," said Miss Lister ponderously, "is a serious thing."

"And we hate serious things, don't we, Luck? We'd much rather run after our tails, eh? Oh, but life is good, is good!"

That first year of her amazing success was a golden year to Margaret, with never a crumpled rose-leaf anywhere. The pity of it was that it fled so soon.

"Last week I was thirty," she said to O'Hara, "now you dare to insinuate that I am thirty-one."

"Thirty-one and 'still on the shelf,' oh spinster aunt!"

"Et tu, brute!"

He wrinkled up his comical face. "Marriage is a woman's fortune, and a man's misfortune," he said proudly. "I made that up myself, and you can have it for your next book. The critic who said that 'Soldiers of Misfortune' was the triumph of genius over fact, will have to own that nephews triumph over genius. If you fell in love and all that, you'd get no end of material out of it."

"But you were advising marriage."

O'Hara's face showed suddenly puritanical. "The same thing, for a woman," he said gravely.

"Oh, we poor women and our disabilities!"

O'Hara looked at her with virtuous indignation. "Now, Meg, none of your side-tracking, and bringing disgrace on your orphan. Your own generation never forgets its nightly

prayer, 'Dear God, make us seem respectable!' Respectability pays, Meg, pays every time. It even pays for men in the end; it's essential for women!"

Meg shouted with laughter. "Oh, Orphy dear, you are growing old, hence this philosophy! I am far too proud and fastidious to 'side-track' as you express it."

"There's nothing like being in love," sighed O'Hara, "specially now the spring is here again! It always gets me worse then, Nature I suppose. Dear old Mother Nature! Well, people can run her down as they will, she's good enough for me! I'm rather in a fuss that I shall get clean had this time, engaged you know, and it's the devil to get out of a woman's clutches with eligible husbands so short and all. But if even that grimalkin opposite has got the spring fever, who am I to hope to escape? I burst into the beggar's room the other day making sure he was out; I wanted to borrow a book, and hanged if my lord wasn't sitting at his desk gazing like a sick calf at a photograph! When he saw me, he shoved it under some papers, and asked me what the devil I wanted and to clear out. I wish I could have caught sight of the lady! Something young and pretty and pink, I suppose, he being into the sere and yellow of forty. Fancy that beggar in love!" He laughed uproariously.

Meg did not laugh. She looked startled, a little sick. Something laid a burning imperious hand upon her heart, crushed it agonisingly. She stooped to put some coal on the fire, but her hand shook so the coal clattered into the grate.

O'Hara had a glimpse of her face. "You are burning your complexion over that fire, let me see to it. Don't you know complexions are important assets for spinster aunts?"

"You didn't see a bit of the photograph?"

"What photograph?" He studied her blazing, primitive eyes with amazement. "Oh, you mean Bear's ladylove? Not I, he took care of that. Jealous beast! Fancy the old Adam going down on his knees to some giggling school-girl."

"He wouldn't go down on his knees, and she wouldn't giggle! Don't be a fool, O'Hara! I won't believe a word about the photograph unless you bring it to me as a proof."

He looked at her aghast. "Oh, I say, that's a bit thick.

Rob the beggar's desk, d'yer mean? That would be dishonourable, fellers don't do that sort of thing, 'less, of course, it happened to be their own girl, and I know it isn't that, 'sides havin' me she wouldn't exactly look at him, what! He's got it in the neck at last, poor devil! Jolly funny, I call it. You're not laughing much!"

Margaret wasn't laughing at all. She was suffering tortures, and wondering what on earth had happened to her. She had had no idea hate was as disconcerting as this. To think of Adam loving and beloved was to dwell on hell. A mighty upheaval was taking place in her volcanic nature. The sleeping fires slept no longer.

O'Hara danced away still laughing, and Margaret sat staring into the fire. "I'm a low, mean, spying, dishonourable beast," she told herself vehemently, "I shall be horribly ashamed afterwards, but I'm going to do it all the same." She waited for Adam to leave his room, and his desk, at her mercy. He did not seem in any hurry to go out.

"How aggravating men are!" she fumed, unconscious of humour.

However, when dusk fell, he departed. Scarcely had the door of Callogan Mansions banged, before Margaret had darted across the passage and was in the sitting-room, in front of the shabby old desk. There was only red, leaping firelight in the room; it reddened her cheek, gleamed in her eyes.

She tore at the lid with shaking fingers. It was locked. "The mean, suspicious beast!" She was not very logical; she was only very primitive. There was no key to be found anywhere. "Just like him!" she thought bitterly. She tried all her own keys, they were useless. "She's too precious to be guarded by an ordinary lock!" she thought irately, "it's enough to try a saint."

The "saint" took up a poker and tried to beat up the lid. She was a virago just then; the rather awful, hitherto dormant, possibilities of her nature had her by the throat.

The desk was strong, but those fierce wrists were strong too. As she struck fiercely, scalding tears ran down her cheeks. "No decent woman would do such a thing; I shall never feel decent again! No decent woman..." She battered at it with increased vigour. It was a great effort,

and a most alarming row, but it was worth it, since the lid, smashed and shattered, sprang open at last.

"Now!" She flung the poker away, dived with long fingers amidst the papers within, caught at the hard edge of cardboard. "I've got it!" she thought triumphantly.

Her triumph was short-lived. An iron grasp fell on her wrists, bruising them mercilessly, and she looked up into the grim dark face of Adam. His eyes were not pleasant to see.

"You!" he exclaimed. The amazement in his face changed to something else: his grip grew more pitiless. "Would it be too much to ask you to explain?" His voice had an edge, a scorn, that bit right into her being.

It was difficult to keep her eyes on his. Beneath his cruel grasp her wrists hurt unbearably, and yet there was something fierce and primitive and agonising that beat in her blood, and welcomed the hurt.

His voice dropped into a purr. "Of what do you seek to rob me, Margaret Lister?"

And then with a gasp the madness died down in Margaret's wild heart, and only bitter shame, bitter regret, was left; not shame or regret that she had dared this unspeakable thing, but that she had been detected and foiled.

What was she to answer him? for answer him she must. He was going to see to that. There was inexplicable chaos within her. What did it matter so much, since she hated this man, that he kept a woman's photograph in his desk? And yet it did matter; it mattered terribly. Then was it not hate after all?

A burning tide of blood made her hot from head to foot; her eyes dilated, shrank dazedly from his. Had even hate the power to hurt like this! She must lie, and lie, and lie. Any absurdity, anything but the truth.

"Let go my wrists!" she said.

There was a new note in his voice. "I will let you go when I please, not a moment before," he returned savagely. "What comes of this lies at your own door. You are quite at my mercy."

He pulled her wrists sharply, and her dark head was swung against his shoulder. He slipped an iron arm round her waist, held her breathless against him. "And now, Margaret Lister, what have you to say to me? Will you

go on mocking, defying, still? What if I refuse to let you go? You came at your own invitation; but you can only go at my will."

Margaret's heart beat madly under his hand, though not with the fear he supposed. Primitive, defiant eyes met the primitive savagery of his, and refused to fall. He bent his face closer. She did not shrink; she defied him. Masterful, dominant woman; masterful, dominant man; they were well matched.

"Why did you come back at such an inappropriate moment?" she asked with a lightness she was far from feeling.

"I had forgotten something. I do not consider the moment. What were you looking for, honourable lady?"

Margaret winced, and made up her mind to her foolish futile lie.

"I will tell you when you let me go."

His grasp tightened. "And if I won't?"

"Then, naturally, I shall never tell you." She spoke lightly enough.

He let her go so suddenly she almost fell. "Well?"

"When O'Hara burst in on you the other evening he noticed you looking at a photograph."

He stared. He had feared for his carefully-guarded papers, the secret of his hidden identity. Had this girl come to suspect it? What was this about a photograph?

Margaret turned to face him; she was preparing for her lie, and, of course, had to look him in the eyes. "O'Hara said it was my photograph," she said boldly, "and of course I was angry. I had never given you one. You had no right to it."

He would deny it was her photograph. She would refuse to believe without proof. He would then grudgingly show her the picture of—the other woman.

He did not, however, all at once deny that he had her photograph; he only stared at her very hard, obviously puzzled.

"You cannot have come by it honestly. My photographers are forbidden to sell it. I mean to convict them if they have done so. Give it me, please!" She held out her hand.

Adam dived into his desk, pushed something into her hand. "Take it then!" he said savagely.

Margaret turned it over, the blood beating in her ears. She longed, yet feared to look upon the face he loved. She found herself staring at her own! It was her last, and certainly flattered, for even the subject thought it did her justice, and that usually speaks for itself. It was Margaret Lister certainly, but Margaret Lister seen through a lover's eyes. Andrew thought it almost nice enough.

She pulled herself together with an effort, her senses were whirling deliriously, happily. "Then he was right?" she managed to say, "but why?"

"It amused me to see how far the vanity of a woman, and a celebrity, could go."

"You thought it could go rather far!" She laughed joyously. "So it can, Rochester, so it can! Of course I had to pay extra to be made as nice as that, and of course it was merely for the sake of my readers I did it. It's the living up to it that's the trouble." He was far enough away from her, but she still felt the grasp of his arm round her, her heart still beat wildly to the touch of his hand. "I suppose they are frightfully disappointed when they see the real me?" She looked at him with her very bright eyes, her cheeks aflame.

"I am scarcely in a position to answer that question," he returned. He did not choose to answer it, for she was far more beautiful than her photograph just then.

"Andrew didn't think it too nice."

His laugh was not altogether successful. "It is something to please a young man's fancy," he retorted.

"Oh, Andrew isn't so young. I am thirty, and he is three years older. I don't care for calves, you know, never did. No man is worth considering before he enters the mill: wait till he comes out of it. Does he come out just putty, with the impress of others upon him; let him pass. Does he come out granite, then at least he is no chance clay. Andrew has been granite these many years."

"Oh, I leave you your little tin gods!"

"How did you get the photograph?"

"It was for sale in a window. I was curious to examine it at my leisure. Was it not rather extreme measures to break open my desk when a mere request would have

sufficed? It was not as if it was anything I valued. My curiosity was satisfied. I had no further use for it."

"Naturally!" she said demurely. She remembered the expression O'Hara had detected on his face. She remembered that his heart had beat as wildly as hers. He could make what excuses he chose; for her part she was satisfied.

He looked at her a little doubtfully, said almost sullenly, "It was drastic measures, Miss Lister."

"It was abomination!" she cried gaily, "there is no excuse. Of course, I was in a temper at the idea of your having my photograph, and when one is in a temper, one does rather act on impulse, you know. You were in a temper, too, weren't you?"

He reddened slightly. "If I was, I had greater cause."

"Will you allow me to supply a new desk?"

"Certainly not!"

"To have it mended at least?" she pleaded.

"I will not, madam. In the future I will keep my door locked, not only when I am in, but when I go out."

"I certainly would, Rochester!" She ran away laughing, trying not to let her dancing feet betray her. She forgot that eyes can also dance.

In her own room she whirled round with Luck. "Oh, Luck he does, you know, he really does! And it was the silliest excuses in the world, old man! Even you would have known better. You don't steal chops because you don't want them, do you? But he does, or says he does. Silly old thing! He'll have to come to it, you know, Luck, I've found the joint in his armour. Oh, he'll have to come to it!"

Then the ache of a devouring love shook her suddenly, and she ceased from dancing and singing, and grew very still.

CHAPTER XLVIII

MILESTONES OF MATURITY

SHE sat there dreaming radiant dreams, her eyes very soft ; then Andrew came in, and she had to rouse herself. "I wish O'Hara would turn up," she said, "one never knows what it means."

"There's the front door now."

Meg listened expectantly, then her face fell, and she got up quickly. "Oh, Andrew, he is walking up the stairs, walking quite like anyone else. He must be ill!" She flew anxiously out at the door. Andrew followed.

O'Hara was sitting on the top of the stairs. When he saw them he put his face in his hands and groaned in a hollow fashion. "I'm done clean brown," he moaned, "a woman's got me for keeps. She made me propose to her, and then accepted me, the coward! It's Miss Lohore. Say good-bye to me quietly ; all is over."

Meg seized him by the arm. "Oh, Orphy, you don't mean it. Miss Lohore is old enough to be your mother."

"Then perhaps she'll keep him in order," said Andrew hopefully.

"Mother! I wouldn't mind that! It's grandmother more like! She'll clinch on to me like a vice, husbands bein' so short an' all, an' her havin' given up hope years ago. Oh, what a mess, oh, what a divil of a mess! Why didn't you look after me better, spinster aunt? Like a fool I told her about the Uncles O'Hara, and how rich they were, an' failin' an' that, an' takin' to writin' to me tender-like. I suppose I shall have to cut and run for it, and then I lose Fairchilds' job. Oh, women are a bore. Why will they insist on bein' wives! Selfish, that's what it is! I think I'll have some brandy and go and lie down and have eau de cologne on my forehead. Help me up, you beggars, I'm as good as married and done for!"

He cheered up after brandy and supper, and sat brooding intently, and suddenly his face cleared. "I have it," he said, and became his cheerful self once more. But he would not tell them his remedy.

That they discovered a few days later, or at least Meg and Adam did. He was racing up the stairs in the gayest spirits, and Adam was going down, when O'Hara shouted for his aunt to come at once.

"It's off?" asked Meg hopefully, "she listened to reason, you're disengaged?"

"Women never listen to reason. I'm not disengaged. I'm engaged some more, see! Leave it to them to decide who's to have me! They never will decide. Me jilt a lady, me risk a breach of promise! Don't you know your orphan better than that? No, no, I'm too wary to play a risky game. It's they that will jilt me. Pride, and can't be made ridiculous, and all that! You know what women are about such things, so fussy! I——"

"But what have you done?" wailed Margaret panic-stricken, while Adam waited, smiling unwillingly.

"Wouldn't I be tellin' you now, but you do talk such a lot. Seein' the mess he was in, an ordinary clever devil would have said to himself, 'It's in the mud I am. How to get out of it? Propose some more; leave it to them.' I went one better. I am the proud fiancé of a whole family. That's where real ingenuity comes in. 'Keep a good thing in the family,' says I to meself, and shure it's kept. I looked round at all Miss Lohore's female relations. When I saw one that wanted a husband, I said, 'Have me?' and she had me. They mostly wanted husbands, widowed grandmothers, flapper-grandchildren, female cousins, spinster aunts," he dug Margaret in the ribs, "sisters, sisters-in-law. 'Will you?' says I. 'We will!' says they, and there you are! If a relation is goin' to give up a prize to another relation, well, I'm out of my reckonin', that's all. They have all accepted my invitation to tea at the White Cabin four sharp to-morrow. I'm goin' to call on the manageress later and claim a percentage. Of course, henceforth the family cut me dead. They decide I am mad or bad; they yield up their fiftieth share of a husband."

Literally O'Hara was only engaged to two relatives of Miss Lohore; but he was never literal; he preferred to be

picturesque, and the two were quite enough, for henceforth Miss Lohore, and all in any way connected with her, cut O'Hara off their visiting list.

"Proposin' when you're safe to remain unmarried is rather fun," said the graceless youth, suddenly disappearing down the stairs with a whoop, "and easy as winkin'..."

Margaret turned to Adam, who had avoided her rather pointedly since the episode of the desk. "I suppose some of it is true?" she said doubtfully, "they will go to the White Cabin and when he doesn't turn up, there will be explanations. They will all cut him, I suppose?"

"One can only suppose it."

She looked up at him demurely. "Is proposing as easy as all that?" she wondered innocently. She was of an impatient nature. Why not have matters settled? They were both old enough surely.

"I have no basis to go on," he returned with a stony stare; "it is obviously fatally easy for fools. That young man is born married. He will probably have ten children at least because he will not be able to keep one. Then he will dump them on your doorstep, and expect you to provide for them as a privilege."

"Dump them, oh, you mean bump them! A series of retributive bumps!" She laughed, looking up at Adam under thick dark lashes. She was conscious of a very becoming frock.

Perhaps he was conscious of it too, for he looked rather quickly away from her. "You need not worry about O'Hara; such people are put into the world with feathers in their heads so that they always fall on their feet, and unless one of those women determines to marry him——"

"What," exclaimed Margaret in horror, "try to marry a man who doesn't want her to! Run after him! Why, no decent woman does that! A creature who could stoop so low would not deserve any sort of a husband! Abominable!"

She spoke with some heat.

"Such things have been known," he returned drily.

She flushed. "Not when a woman has pride, self-respect. I tell you it's an impossible thing to do! No decent woman does it!"

"Then there are a fair number of indecent wives!" he retorted, and passed on.

Margaret looked after him with misty eyes. "All the same he does," she told herself thankfully, "poor Bear, he'll have to go through his paces pretty hard before he gets his own way, and then he won't get it for long. I see now that marriage needn't be dull. It depends on oneself and one's partner. One must always choose the most unsuitable, and opposite. It's really frightfully simple, and rather fun. How we will fight!"

She wondered when enmity and dislike had glided imperceptibly into love. Had love always been there, love asleep? She could not answer that question at any time. They had known each other twelve years, been aggravated by each other, no more, and suddenly they discovered that they loved! Margaret had written of many love affairs, easily, feeling nothing of the passion she described so vividly, believing little in it. It had seemed to her making a great fuss about a very little matter, a necessary fuss because the British Public must have its "love interest." Now she told herself she had underestimated, not overestimated, this thing. The love-affairs in her books had been rather complicated or tragic matters. Her own seemed quite the simplest in the world. He had only, as O'Hara would have said, to say "Have me?" and she would have him. Then they would marry as soon as possible, and be "rather dreadfully" happy. "I hope I shall have a son," she thought, "not girls, but sons. That'll be jolly." She named the first one Adam. Then should come Philip, and lastly Bruce. Certainly Margaret went rather quickly ahead.

Sitting happily on the stairs, with her dominant chin in her hands she mapped out the process of her courtship. What fun it would be! She would not accept him at first after all, she would make it as difficult as possible. It would do him good to find he could not have quite everything all his own way. He would be so grim and masterful over it, certainly take her consent for granted! The faster his advance, the quicker her retreat. They would be always advancing and retreating. Not till she had driven him mad with anxiety would she let him drag a reluctant "yes" from her.

Unfortunately she was busy with a new novel, a book that was to be even greater than the last, and she discovered

what a jealous mistress art could be. It would brook no rivals. "All for me, or nothing," it said, and eluded her advances. Inspiration shook its vivid skirts at her and fled with mocking laughter, and Adam's grim face took its place.

Then Margaret, tormented beyond bearing, got angry. "I never asked for love," she exclaimed resentfully, "certainly not such love as this. Why must I feel more than the easy sentimental affection that half my sex call love?" She could not bear to see the life go out of the thing she had created. "If I could be all author, or all woman; if one need not always be at the throat of the other! I must put it aside, I see that. I must marry quickly, be all woman, and in a little I shall be sane again." For a moment her fury rose against the man she loved; he had spoiled a masterpiece. "Love wouldn't matter, it might help; it's being 'in love' that's the devil. I wanted that 'me' to sleep always. If only I had loved easily and lightly as one does in one's early youth; then it would be over and forgotten! Now it has risen like a giant and I am helpless in its clutches." She felt love as the gods had felt it, when the world and love and life were all young and splendid together. A great brain, a great heart, a virile passionate body had been given to Margaret Lister.

So she waited for Adam to put an end to the torment.

It almost seemed as if the idea never occurred to him. He had never been so stiff, so distant, so grim. Far from the slightest attempt at love-making, he treated her as if she did not exist.

Margaret grew angry, and frightened. Had she made a mistake after all? Her breath caught at the idea. Was there some entanglement? Had he a wife somewhere, a woman married when he was a boy; some ghastly blunder?

"But that needn't prevent him making love to me," she thought, careless of propriety. The conventions never troubled her in the least; they were for the average person; they were not for her. She made her own laws. Love was love. She did not want the world's approval, she wanted Adam Coneybeare-Ffiffe, and she meant to have him.

"If there's a wife in the background, she can remain in the background," she told herself impatiently. "What's bigamy after all as long as people don't know about it?"

376 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

She took to sitting on the stairs as well as running up and down them. Adam usually found her there, and was not pleased.

"Why don't you sit in your room and on your chairs?" he demanded irately.

"Because," she answered calmly, "my chairs are comfortable. They make me feel like a contented cat. I just doze or read. Here I have to think, and even an author needs to think sometimes."

"It can be overdone; one just comes round in a circle. And there are draughts."

"I like draughts."

"You are in the way of people going up and down."

"People can step over."

He stepped over.

"Some day I shall have to pinch his ankles, I know it!" she thought, left alone. "Aggravating things men are, to be sure, when they won't!"

Adam was making it quite plain that "he wouldn't." It became a battle of wills between them; determined advances, determined retreats. She had so mapped it out, except that the parts had been differently filled. She, for instance, had been pursuer, not the pursued. She knew she ought to feel ashamed of herself, but she only felt horribly angry. She was sure he was longing to give in; that only pride and absurd "ideas" prevented him. It was her part to get the better of those ideas, and she never doubted her success. It might take her a few days, even a week, possibly a month.

She did not foresee years.

Adam could have acknowledged discretion the better part of valour, but he knew his own strength and believed it far stronger than Margaret, or his own longing. And so the battle went on.

Andrew Merriment looked on in silent agony.

"Everybody is spoiling me so dreadfully," sighed Meg to her quarry, "even relations make a lot of me now! Funny my head doesn't swell, isn't it? But, of course, heads only do when there's nothing within them on account of Nature abhorring a vacuum, or some such reason. Every second man I meet is trying to marry me. So exhausting!"

A fair number of men were, at this time, trying to marry

Margaret Lister, but this was rather a "picturesque" way of putting it.

"I had no idea there were so many bachelors in London," he returned; "possibly the statistics are wrong."

"There are the widowers, divorced, and so on," she explained.

"Of course, that accounts for it!" There were reasons why he held his own marriage a crime, but his selfishness could not endure the thought of Margaret happy with another. She had her art; let that content her. Youth had passed for him, was passing for her. In a year or two it would be easier. Calm pulses could look indulgently back on the storm of earlier days, and wonder that so much had been made of a passing thing. Yes, it would pass; all the fever and fret of life passed in the end, leaving the safer, happier things.

"I don't flatter myself it's me," she said rather sulkily, "I know it's entirely my fame or my fortune."

"Well, it's a commercial age."

Her eyes flashed. "It isn't that with all of them, all the same. And I'm not in my dotage."

"Of course not. Why, you are only young-middle-aged."

"Young-middle-aged!" She echoed the words as if she had a nasty taste in her mouth, and indeed she had, "thirty——"

"Thirty-two."

"I was going to add the 'two.'" She was angry at his memory. "And you are forty-two, nearly elderly. That's worse."

"Oh, I find it pleasant enough. One has learned wisdom of a sort, and content, and self-control. May I pass you?"

He passed her.

On her way to her room, she stooped, her mouth to his keyhole. "Will you give me away, Rochester?"

"Delighted!"

She had expected something less eager. "Oh, hang it!" exclaimed the exasperated husband-hunter. "This sort of thing is disgraceful, of course, but I'm going to beat him, the pig-headed brute! After all, it's only disgraceful when one fails."

The next time they met, she was looking so pale and

depressed, and held her head so miserably in her hands, that he stopped of his own accord. "Toothache?" he asked.

"No, birthday-ache. I'm thirty-three to-day, though of course I only own the truth to those who know it, and know that I know they know. And I'm still a spinster, though no one can say I've ceased 'struggling.'"

Adam bit back a smile. "Where are all the 'every second' men?"

"Ah, but I was only thirty-two then, a mere child!" She spoke lightly enough, but her heart was hot with bitterness, and she felt she hated Adam. He was wasting the last remnant of her youth. She wanted to give it to him, for them to tread the last measure hand in hand. And he threw her gift back in her face and passed on. He had spent all the last years passing on. Was he going to spend the rest of life in the same way?

"Always the battle; never the victory? No, no," she cried, "I will win, I will!"

"I've come to my last chance," she groaned, "and he hasn't any brains. What would you do?"

"Marry him," advised Adam quietly, "brains, in a husband, are merely a disability. When is it going to be?"

"So you have suddenly become an advocate for matrimony. Is it matrimony for women only, you advise? Is that why you stand out of it? 'He saveth others; himself he cannot save.'"

Adam turned rather white. "You have put it exactly," he said.

"In other words nobody will ever have you?" She was growing reckless.

He lit a cigarette with steady hand. "I think that's true, that nobody will ever have me," he returned calmly.

Margaret laughed, rather harshly. "Not even as a birthday present, when one has to take what's offered, and say 'thank you'?" She did not, however, look at him. "Now I've asked him to ask me," she thought, horrified. "I never guessed it would come to that."

"I never give birthday presents," he said after a slight pause, "I consider they are one of the farces it is better to ignore. They remind one also of the flight of the years."

After a certain age one prefers to forget one's birthday. May I step across you ? ”

He stepped across.

Weeks, months, years, and weeks, months, years, all wasted ! The comedy became a tragedy, as comedies can.

“ I am thirty-four, it's a terrible age. I am growing ugly ! ” She wept to find the grey hairs. She turned sick. Of course the game was lost now. Thirty-four and grey hairs ! They showed so in the black. If she could not win when she was young and attractive, how dare she hope to win now ? And yet she would not give in. She forced herself somehow to write her great novel, and somehow she finished it, and knew it good. It would inevitably succeed enormously, because its success had come to matter so little. It was all of a part with the hateful irony of life.

She thought miserably of her pursuit of Adam. “ If it was any other woman I should call her a shameless hussy. I would not have such a creature for a friend. No, I would not call her a shameless hussy either, I should call her an abandoned creature, and a fool for her pains ! ”

It was ironical to remember that she made all her heroines modest and womanly, of the type that would sooner die than pursue a man ; they were almost too proud to encourage their suitors ! “ And I have no pride at all,” she thought sombrely. “ Still they had different heroes. I never gave them a pig-headed horror like Adam.” How lucky those heroines were, how luckless their creator ! “ Golden gifts for all the rest, sorrow of heart for the king's daughter.” “ That's just what it comes to,” thought the great writer, “ and it's beastly unfair, that it is ! ”

Why, life was just irony upon irony ! Only the unthinking, the young, the ignorant, those who had yet to taste it, found it fun. “ What a crude young ass I was ! ” she muttered.

“ I have piles of acquaintances, but hardly any friends.” True, Andrew Merriment was left, and always would be left, something told her ; the boy was now a man of thirty-seven, growing a little grey too. He was less than ever “ merry ” now. Dealmere and Gunter had drifted away. Even the “ Silly Billy ” had departed, taking such inabilities as he possessed to the Colonies. He was not a success, but he was less unsuccessful. For some only this is written ;

to be more or less unsuccessful. He had of course hung marriage round his neck, and possessed a Silly Billy of his own. "Even he is better off than I!" thought Margaret grimly.

She was not often morbid, but she was morbid now. To have gained everything, save that only which mattered! For years she had not dared to think of Philip and his pitiful tragedy, but in this dark hour Philip took hold of her again. Ghastly fingers seemed to cling to hers, he lay at her feet again, but his face was white, and there was blood upon his clothes. If she had understood a little while there had been time!

There was no joy in victory; only in pursuit lay happiness. She had fame, and fortune, and leaden feet. Sixteen years ago she had come to conquer fortune with only hope in her pocket, and youth, and dancing pulses. She had been happy then, though she had not known it.

London was to be her oyster, it was to open to her need, her genius; to yield the succulent contents, the priceless pearl. The oyster shell had been very closely set; patient fingers, bleeding fingers, had availed her nothing. Now after sixteen years, years whose maw had swallowed youth, hope, illusion, it was wrenched apart at length. What of the contents? A withered blackened body, for the oyster had died in its shell, an unpleasant odour, and no pearl at all!

Yet many fair things had knocked at her door. Hard won success had come, a stalwart figure. And Love? It had thundered at the portals often enough, though never the love she sought. Andrew still waited outside. Mature love, young love, long faithful love. The young god with red-brown eyes already shadowed by destiny, and he had scarcely waited to knock. He had been so sure of his bride. He lay in his coffin at twenty-one, and shame was the name of the bride he clasped. That door, how the insistent knocking of the next generation had terrified her, how she had sought to hold them at bay! They had trooped through it long since, were treading hard upon her heels.

"I will go to Daventry for a little," she decided. Yet Daventry made her restless too. "There is something about the castle, I don't know what," she confessed to her twin, "it isn't just tradition, and it isn't just memories,

but it gets hold of me, makes me love it, even covet it a little. Then I get jealous, Dosé." Yes, she would go to Daventry. It was good at least to see Bruce and Dosé so happy. It was not altogether ill to see hell looking out of one woman's eyes, knowing the hell she had made for others.

CHAPTER XLIX

THE BATTLE OF THE STAIRS

THE depths were succeeded by the heights. The next morning she woke up in gayest spirits. She would not go to Daventry so soon. She went so often, and Dosé was so anxious for her to marry. She would stay and show Adam she was not beaten yet. It seemed a good augury to meet him by accident as she was going from one room to another. She was glad she had done her hair in that new way; it suited her, she knew. Of course she was rather horribly old, yet that morning she had not looked it.

"Hail, oh Sphinx!" she cried gaily.

Her radiance compelled his unwilling admiration. "You make me answer to a great many names," he complained.

Both thought instantly of one she had not been able to make him answer to, the little word "lover."

"Your new book is a great achievement," he said warmly, "how rich you must be! Why don't you have a house in the country?"

"I'll think why some other time, and I'm not half rich enough. Have you heard anything of the Red Line speculation? I am thinking of selling out and putting every cent I possess into it."

"I would advise you to do nothing of the sort!" he exclaimed.

"Then of course I shall do it, even quicker than I thought. I think I will mortgage my future too, and have a real big spec. I shall emerge a millionaire."

"Or a beggar. I warn you to be careful. The thing is a swindle."

Meg hummed a little tune. "I shall be a beggar or a millionaire if I like! Mind your own business, please.

THE BATTLE OF THE STAIRS 383

If I go into the workhouse it won't matter to me, and you will have driven me out at last."

"Why don't you marry Andrew Merriment?" he asked abruptly, "he's a good sort."

She was startled and angry but kept her head, and her audacity. "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?" she asked.

He flushed and affected not to hear. "It's absurd going on like this."

"Like what?"

"A spinster."

"Don't call me abusive names, I won't have it. And whose fault is it that I'm a spinster? I ask you that?"

"You ask more than I can answer. I am not Providence or Fate. Andrew Merriment would at least gladly remove this 'abusive' name from your vocabulary. It is time you were married. Women can leave these things too long."

"Never men?"

"Every year you will get more difficult to please, more fastidious, more fearful. Youth takes quickly, gladly, without thought or question, and just amalgamates. It is the best way."

Margaret laughed and tapped with her foot; she did not want to lose her temper, or at least show that she had lost it. She looked up into his eyes. "You are very determined to find me a husband. Well, if you will find me the right one, I won't say no."

He turned away. "I have no such power, Miss Lister."

"If this goes on it will be I who will propose," she thought in horror. "Are there such women? Am I one of them?"

"How's Luck?" he threw over his shoulder, "I have neither seen nor heard him lately."

"Oh, only dying," she answered bitterly, "you warned me Luck would desert me and you were right. It is a way you have, being right. It is not a pleasant quality."

"I am sorry," he said.

"You do not care. Just an old dog. He couldn't keep young any more than I, or you. Oh, it's a hateful world. I should like to shut it right away for a change."

"We can't do that, one cannot say, 'Thus far shalt thou come and no farther, and here shall thy proud waves

be stayed.' The tide sweeps up just the same, may not be penned, over our feet very likely; we may close the door, but we cannot shut out its sense or sound. To be in the world, and yet not of it, is an idle dream for you and me. We are the world, and it is us. The great Christians and idealists can do this thing; but we are the realists, the doers. We are the world, and the flesh, and the devil, in ourselves, and wherever we go we carry the thing with us, bring its stir into other lives. For the sleepers content, peace, a cross, with a crown to follow; for the doers red life, the saddle, the sword!"

Then he went quietly away and Meg found his door shut in her face.

Always the same answer! For sixteen years he had been shutting his door in her face. If he had not loved her there would have been hope, she might have compelled his love. But he loved her, and yet denied them both.

That night Andrew asked her to marry him. "You are spoiling your life, and my life," he said, "and for what? A closed door. Are all the years I have loved you to go for nothing? I would wait, endure anything. Only I can't do without you, Meg, you must not ask that." He crushed her hands against his breast.

Margaret hid her face. "We have both got to bear it," she said, "you as well as I. If I could have loved you I would. I can't."

His voice broke. "After all these years."

"We're too old to cry about it, at any rate." She put down her face and wept.

He soothed her tenderly. "Darling, don't, not for me. It's Beare?"

"Yes, but he won't; he will never." She wept the louder. "I'd rather be miserable with him than happy with anyone else, but he won't even let me be miserable. Oh, if one could love where it was expedient to love! Then love might be a blessing; as it is, it is a curse. My poor Andrew, I am sorry. I can bear to suffer, I must, but to make others suffer too. Oh, I can't bear that!"

He kissed her hair. "Then we will forget," he said unsteadily. "I shall always be there waiting, you know that, dear. When you are tired, then you will come, and we will make the best of what's left together."

THE BATTLE OF THE STAIRS 385

"I shall never come save as a friend, but always as a friend," she said surely. "Oh, why must one fall in love to matter? Why not enough to be pleasant, but not enough to be painful?"

"I am the last person to answer that question," returned Andrew, "for me it has never been pleasant, always painful."

Then, half-heartedly, they changed the subject, and talked of other matters.

It was a few nights after that, that an adventure befell Margaret and quickened her hopes.

She was coming up late, and a lighted candle was in her hand. For once she was not thinking of Adam, but a communication she had received from her publisher. On the first landing she paused for a moment, for she fancied she heard a step behind her, the sound of breathing. As she was turning round to look, an astonishing thing happened.

Her candle was blown out by some unseen agency, a quick footstep leapt out at her, and she stood in darkness within the fierce clasp of tremulous arms. Her heart beat against a hand as it had beaten once before. She felt she knew the hand. Then she was caught right up, and lips were pressed to hers with such a world of love and longing in them, that her very soul was drawn out of her.

It was a magic moment, and it passed like magic. In another instant the unseen assailant had vanished as abruptly as he had come.

She did not light her candle. She groped trembling into her own room, hid a burning radiant face on her pillows. At last! At last! He must speak now. The weary contest was at an end.

But Adam did not speak. He passed her, or would have done so, as usual, when they encountered next day, but she was not going to allow that. She was going to find out; bring his "assault" home to him.

"Have you a long memory?" she asked gaily, "long enough to remember a certain assault upon the stairs?"

"These stairs?" He looked for explanation.

"When I slid down the bannisters, oh, a thousand years ago!" she sighed. "When I was delightfully young, and delightfully foolish? You were very angry. Surely you remember."

"I remember now."

"Well, this time I have been the assaulted." She watched him sharply.

"Who has taken to sliding down bannisters?" he enquired.

"It wasn't sliding down bannisters. It was blowing out candles and—and," she hesitated, flushed, "the wretched creature kissed me."

"Really, some man? You must have been encouraging him, Miss Lister."

He looked serious enough, but she thought she detected mockery in his tones. Her face grew hot. "I never encourage them," she said angrily. "If they are worth anything they don't need it, and if they aren't worth anything, they aren't going to get it."

"An excellent thesis. Queer things happen on stairs, it seems. I trust you reproved him as he deserved?"

"He went away before I could say anything."

"Believing discretion the better part of valour? You should write and complain."

"When I don't know who it is!" She no longer felt sure. There were others it might have been. "It might have been several."

"Then you are more encouraging than you owned?"

She stamped. "On the stairs! Like a housemaid! I should just like to say what I thought of him to his face!" She stared into his.

He stared back. "Then you have a suspicion?"

"Well, he hadn't a moustache."

"So few of us have now-a-days. Heriot is the only man in the buildings with a moustache. We can pass him."

"Mr. Heriot is small; this man was big and powerful, as big and powerful as you."

"But I am quite the biggest tenant; perhaps people seem bigger in the dark; they would, I suppose. Tom Ridlands?"

"Oh, he wouldn't have blown out the candle."

Adam stifled an exclamation. "Wouldn't he?" he said a little blankly.

"No, and he would have proposed to me first and kissed me afterwards, not the other way round."

"So he proposed afterwards? And left without an

THE BATTLE OF THE STAIRS 387

address? Certainly a blackguard! You must be more careful of your actions and your acquaintances in future, Miss Lister."

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it!" she retorted crudely.

"I beg your pardon, I thought you were asking for it."

She hurried to her own room before she should be tempted to say too much. Then it hadn't been him. It must have been Tom Ridlands after all, and yet, and yet—

"I will find out, I will!" she swore.

The next time they met it was she who made to pass in silence, and he who paused. "Any further happening on stairs?" he asked.

"Oh, only one," she said, "quite a little one! Possibly a mere bad habit!"

He flushed and started. "You mean——"

"Oh, nothing. What should I mean?" Her eyes were all innocence. "I must have been encouraging him, I suppose." She passed on, her heart beating. "Yes, it was he!" she decided.

It was some evenings later that she happened to be going up the stairs with her candle in her hand, and heard a footstep behind her, *the* footstep she was almost certain. She refrained from turning her head, and stood for a moment on the same spot that had witnessed the assault of days before, the candle shaking in her hand.

Mr. Beare however seemed unconscious of any coincidence. He just greeted her in the most matter of fact way, and when she remained standing, said:

"Are you waiting for anybody or anything, Miss Lister?"

"Certainly not!" And suddenly she lost her temper, and flung the candle in his face.

He picked it up, lighted it again. "From all accounts your candle goes out rather easily," he said handing it her. Then he shut his door.

Meg sat down on the top stair, and stared at it. "It will never be opened to me now," she sighed. "I see that." Her mouth gave a humorous twist, though she was not feeling in the least amused. "It is quite a Jacob and Rachael business," she told herself, "first seven years, and again seven years. I wonder if Jacob found Rachael

388 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

worth it. Probably not. And he had a Leah." She laughed softly. "That of course made a difference. One should always see to it that one has a Leah."

She sat there for a long while, hungry-hearted, defeated at last.

Inside his room, Adam fought the hardest fight of his life, for he knew that she was there, and he longed to open the door. When he heard her go at length to her own room, he wiped a damp face, and said "Thank God!" For he had been on the point of capitulation.

Margaret, never guessing how close she had been to complete victory, looked round her room as if taking a long farewell, and dropped into a chair. "I am beaten," she owned.

A few days later she disappeared without a word from Callogan Mansions. She did not even leave her address.

"I knew it!" exclaimed Sue-Sue. "Mark my words, Mrs. Simms, I said it'll come to doin' a guy, an' she's done it!"

Adam should have been satisfied. It had taken him sixteen years to drive Meg away, but at last he had done it, and the victory was his; but it was a victory that trailed with broken wing.

CHAPTER L

THE END OF A STRUGGLE

SHE went in the first instance to Daventry, but Daventry made her restless, and Dosé's happiness made her restless too. The devotion of husband and wife seemed to grow with the years, and seeing the ideal marriage did not make matters easier for Margaret, who confessed her envy to her twin. "Your home and your husband, I covet them both," she laughed.

"Oh, Meg, why don't you marry? Everybody knows you can. You would be ever so much happier."

"Don't you know a confirmed spinster when you see one?" retorted Meg, and changed the subject. She spoke of Lady Daventry. "All these years and not a grey thread in her wonderful hair," she exclaimed enviously, "and look at mine!"

"Look at her face, and think of her life," said Dosé gravely, "do not envy her anything, Meg. When we meet we pass without recognition, but once or twice I have seen her eyes. They haunt me. You know she could live elsewhere, and we thought she would, but she cannot drag herself away from Daventry, and the scene of her former triumphs and sin. It is rather terrible, I think."

"It is no more than justice," answered Margaret grimly. "I cannot pity that woman till I have forgotten Phil, and that is not yet. I am going to hide myself on Dartmoor for a little; I feel I want to hide, to shut out the world. If I let you have my address you must keep it secret. Promise!"

Dosé promised, though this new move distressed her. Meg was so changed, so dreadfully changed. All her high spirits had gone, and she looked grey and old. She did not seem to care very much for anything these days; it

was terribly distressing. It all came of being unmarried at four-and-thirty.

Meg found a strange isolated cottage on Dartmoor. It was perched up among boulders, and guarded by three gnarled anguished-looking trees, blasted, blighted, but living on in death.

"It's like my own life," she thought a little absurdly, and at once took the miserable hut, it was scarcely more.

It was two miles from any other habitation, and had no accommodation for a servant, so that Meg lived the simple life with a vengeance. But she had come to forget, and the harder she had to work, physically as well as mentally, the better. She fetched her provisions once a week, and had to tramp miles to get them. For the rest of the time she hardly saw or spoke to a soul, and there was none to wander over the moors with her. "If only I had Luck," she would sigh, but Luck was dead.

It never dawned upon her that in the world she had left rumour was busy with her name, and that one paper had come out with a sensational "Mysterious Disappearance of a Famous Authoress." The Red Line Speculation came out in its true colours about the same time, and rumour said Meg had lost her all in it, and more than her all.

Adam was the first to connect the two matters. He remembered her declared intention of putting all she possessed into the thing, mortgaging her future to obtain more to speculate with. He had given advice which would prove fatal, Margaret being what she was. Of course she was ruined, perhaps even in debt. She would disappear out of sheer pride when disaster threatened.

He went to Andrew, but Andrew knew nothing.

Then he sought O'Hara, and O'Hara stared at Adam's agitated face and wondered exceedingly. He owned that he knew his aunt's address, had even been down to see her, but that he was not to reveal her whereabouts except under pressing conditions.

Adam paced the floor in a ferment. "You can at least tell me how she is living."

"Oh, a blasted heath and all that, blasted trees, a regular Macbeth scene, though I saw no witches. Possibly they ride at night and drop into the hut. She's pigging it like a beggar and no mistake; suppose we shall have a very

THE END OF A STRUGGLE 391

realistic novel. How the wretched live, and so on, but I hope she'll chuck it soon. She was looking very much the worse for wear, I thought."

"It never occurred to you, of course, it was a matter of necessity rather than just an experiment? Would she tell a soul if she had lost all her money, let anyone help her? She's the pride of the devil. She'd just disappear and starve in a hole. My God!"

"What bosh!" gasped O'Hara, "and Meg's got no end of an appetite, always had. If she wanted money, isn't there me? Don't I make a decent bit? Aren't the Uncles O'Hara popping off like birds off a twig, and haven't they as good as said I'm heir. Why, Meg can wallow in cash, and whisky, for a word! Do you think she'd hesitate to come to me? Hasn't she always shared with me? Doesn't she know I ask nothing better than to share with her? God bless us! Meg 'bust,' what next!"

Adam gripped his arm. "Tell me how you found her?" he commanded.

"Oh, looking rather off colour, but then her togs, frightful old things, an' doin' all the work! Awfully thin she was, half-starved-lookin'," he paused suddenly, horror in his face. "I took her by surprise, and she apologised there was no grub in to offer me, but the boy that she'd arranged with to leave it hadn't come though she expected him every minute." The speaker gasped, grew pale. "And now I remember she said she hadn't any change, and borrowed a sovereign, it does seem rather——" He gazed panic-stricken at the other.

"And how long have you left her to starve, you callous young hound? Have you heard from her since?"

"No."

"Have you sent her money?"

O'Hara's face grew contorted; he seemed incapable of reply.

"So you left her to die like a dog in a ditch. Oh, you would, you would!"

"You can't really think——" faltered O'Hara. He could hardly speak. "Not Meg, not Old Meg!" He burst into tears.

"I'm going down at once. I may be too late. Give me directions at once."

392 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

O'Hara, blubbering like a baby for all his thirty-two years, faltered forth particulars. He wanted to go as well, but Adam would not hear of it, and had made himself master of the situation. He collected all his stray cash, flung on an overcoat, and dashed into the street. He just managed to catch the train.

So that was how it happened, that just as Meg was telling herself with more or less truth that she was in sight of a "cure," that the new love for Adam had been displaced by the old hatred, and that she would say no if he came and asked her on his knees, the latch lifted and he entered.

Her heart beat madly. It was victory then, not defeat, after all. "And I will say 'no' just the same, at first," she assured herself. She almost flung it at him as he stepped over the threshold, before he opened his lips to speak.

Then astonishment held her, for there was a man in a laden cart outside, and Adam dragging out sacks and piling them on the floor, while bread and groceries, meat, all manner of provisions, were heaped on the table. She rubbed her eyes. Was Adam mad, or was she?

She had asked for love; he brought her bread!

She had often been angry with Adam, but never quite so angry as at this moment. He was making her ridiculous.

"May I ask what all that is, and what it is for?" she demanded icily, "and above all what you are doing here?"

He drew a thankful breath. She was gaunt and thin indeed, but she was alive, and as proud as ever. He was not too late.

"I was coming to a place near, so I thought I might as well look you up," he said awkwardly, "and when I found out how far you were from the shops, it seemed a pity not to—to——"

"Bring food for an army. Who is going to eat all that rubbish before it goes bad? How did you get my address?"

"I made O'Hara give it me. So you went into the Red Line bubble as I feared you would?"

She had expected a proposal; first he brought food, then he discussed finance. Her temper rose. Certainly she loved him no longer: she hated him. He thought her a fool also. "I never had anything to do with the Red Line speculation," she said tartly, "you warned me yourself."

"That was why I made sure you were in it. Then all this," he waved his hand round the place, "is choice, not necessity!"

"Certainly!" She pointed derisively to the sacks. "You pictured me in the 'workhouse' and brought me my pound of tea. Is that it? Were you going to get me into a 'Home,' a home for incurables, or inebriates, or poor authoresses? Is there a ticket of admission in your pocket?" She was very much Meg of the disconcerting eyes just then. All he had made her suffer was fresh in her mind; she did not forget her own humiliation. She had almost gone on her knees to this man. The intolerable pain of it all was getting better, till he came, in his callous way, to stir it all up again. If he looked for a welcome he would look in vain. She felt she never wanted to see his hateful face again.

"I did come to offer you a home," he said sullenly, he was angry too, "although not the kind you suppose. But you are still rich." He seemed aggrieved by her riches. "I cannot hope my poor offer would prove of any interest to you."

"Probably not," she answered.

He felt suddenly unnerved. Had he lost her? Was it too late? He took up some hideous ornaments on the mantelpiece and played with them nervously. Though his eyes were on them alone, he was scarcely conscious of their existence.

Margaret leaned back in her chair and watched him. She was going to make it as hard as possible.

Adam, struggling to break the iron restraint of years, found himself bound hand and foot by the chains he had laid upon himself. Suitable words would not come; no words would come. He got angry. She knew perfectly well what he wanted to say. Why couldn't she help him? She had been ready enough to do that, and more, in the past. Women were the most perverse creatures in the world. To fall in love with one was the very devil. At that moment they were enemies again rather than lovers.

"I hadn't meant to marry at all," he burst out at length. He dropped the spotted dog into the grate as he spoke, and it was smashed to atoms.

394 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

"How interesting," she murmured idly. "Rather a blessed escape for someone, I should say."

He glared at her, and she picked up the bits of dog. "I shall have to cement the tail to the head," she sighed, "there doesn't seem any body."

Adam lost his nerve a little. He seized a china cow and played with it so violently its head came off. He handed it to her. "It hasn't got a head," he stammered.

"It had, not long ago," she retorted. "When you have quite finished here, you will find my tea-service and so on in the back-kitchen. Perhaps when you have broken up my home you will be good enough to go, unless of course you wish to qualify for post as house parlour-maid."

"I did not come here to trifle, Margaret Lister, I came——"

She caught her breath. "You came to bring sacks of food, and to break my china."

"There were reasons why I had no right to marry, there are reasons still——"

"What does it matter? You always were, always will be, the disagreeable, confirmed bachelor."

"There was never anything of the bachelor about me, by choice. My reason still says no. Unfortunately I'm up against something stronger than reason. Can't you see I am trying to ask you to marry me?"

"I don't think you are trying very nicely," she returned. He was commanding, not asking. She would not give in so easily as he expected. He owed her reparation surely!

He stared in genuine amazement. "You cannot be going to refuse," he gasped, "and after——" But he had the grace to pause, and go rather red.

Margaret went even redder. "You think I encouraged you? Well, if I did, it was merely as a pastime, vain sir, and out of perversity. As long as you wouldn't you interested me, but as soon as you would, oh, that is a very different matter! You're just one of the rest then."

"You have forgotten the stairs then?"

She was off her guard. "You said, in everything but words, it wasn't you."

"And you knew it could be nobody else. Well, Meg?"

So you refuse me?" He buttoned his coat with a business-like air. She would come to her senses now.

But she only held out a careless hand. "Oh, good-bye, Rochester!"

He beamed, and the dark cloud was swept from his face. It was good to hear that name again. He gripped her hand, seized her other, and began to pull her towards him.

She resisted with all her strength.

He let her see how little it counted against his. She found herself held within the circle of his arms, his lips on hers. He kissed her passionately again and again, murmured incoherencies into her ear, and Meg clung to him and cried, a little for happiness, and a little for regret.

"Oh, Bear, the long, long, wasted years. We might have spent them together! And now youth is gone. We can never share that. Oh, you have cheated me, cheated us both! All the best gone, gone for ever! I am thirty-five, you ten years older. It's horrible! Thirty-five, a hateful age! I would almost rather be forty, and call myself middle-aged and be blown to it! But at thirty-five you like to pretend you are still young, and it's such a feeble pretence sometimes. I have not felt it till you came, and I shall never look it again. How can one pretend to be young when one's hair is so grey? I don't think I shall ever forgive you that."

"Oh, Meg, dear heart, it's been as bitter, more bitter I think, for me. I had only to say the word, I ached to say it, and there was that which kept me back. I must tell you what it was. I am that Adam of your childhood, son of that Lulu. She is dead in the flesh, but she is not all dead, for her blood is in me. We may have to face her again in our children. Dare you risk that, Meg?"

"We will face it together," she answered steadily, though she had gone a little pale, "and we will forget it, dear. It would never have kept me from you. I wish I had known years ago!" Then she leaned against him and laughed softly. "Oh, Adam, I was sworn to marry you a lifetime ago! Have you forgotten? How hard you tried to elude your fate, and how useless it all was!"

"Defeat is more priceless than victory," he answered, "and now you are to come back with me into civilisation

and be married at once. I have waited some sixteen years for my wife, and I'm not going to wait any longer. I am marrying you entirely for your money and your fame, so you needn't give yourself airs."

"You'll be perfectly poisonous as a husband," returned Meg happily, "you'll often get the last word, and always want your own way. Still, I never thought you'd be nice when I'd captured you; I only looked upon you as necessary."

"I'll be as nice as I know how to be," he returned with a strange new humility.

CHAPTER LI

CLOSING SCENES

"Now I am come to the end of the road—
To the very end,
Farther than this no touch of the hand,
No voice of a friend.
Only the dark where the path breaks off
And the milestones end."

The Last Journey (PATRICIA WENTWORTH).

EVEN as Adam stepped over Meg's threshold, the closing scenes were taking place at Daventry.

Though it was actually winter, the air was more like summer, and the sun bright and warm. Bruce rode gaily to the Meet on his mettlesome hunter, feeling sure of a good run. He had seldom felt happier or more light-hearted. Dosé had laughed when she kissed him good-bye, and told him he was "fey." He thought of her now with a tender smile on his face, as he had seen her standing on the steps, the lovely little girls each side of her. The thought of the cross-roads to be passed, the watching face of the woman who hated him, could hardly dim his gay spirits. She had done her worst, his enemy, she could touch him no longer for all her hate.

As he came in sight of the Dower House, a woman left it, coming quickly to the gate that opened into the road. Bruce frowned, for he saw they must encounter, and both always tried to avoid that. Lady Daventry had a long white floating veil about her hat, and the wind stirred it briskly. She never went abroad without a veil to cover her disfigurement as much as possible, but this was not the type of thing she usually wore. She had, as a matter of fact, snatched it up hurriedly and flung it round her hat.

Now as she heard the sound of a horse cantering, and recognised Bruce, she turned to regain the gate, to wait

398 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

till he had passed, and as she did so, the powerful, nervous horse came level with her, and at sight of the floating veil shied fiercely. He galloped past her and was gone, Bruce keeping his seat with difficulty.

Lady Daventry went quickly up to the tower room where she could see along the road for a long distance. There was however nothing on the road, and she came quickly down again. There was no reason why she should not have her walk. Bruce had obviously kept his seat ; she need not have remembered the stone walls that lay ahead with such vividness.

As her hand was on the gate, there came the sound of furious galloping, and she caught her breath. The horse was returning, and he was beyond control. He swung round on her at that moment, riderless.

Then a fierce exultation shook this woman. Her enemy was dead. She would not willingly have raised a finger to bring him death, she had juggled with fate once too often, but she was glad that death had come through her agency, for she never doubted death had come. If she had been able to see the dead man lying against the stone wall she could have been no more certain. It had been worth while to suffer so much at the Dower House for this. It was a moment that repaid for everything.

The horse was almost upon her, and suddenly she caught her breath, for he was not riderless after all. An old man rode him, an old man with terrible eyes. His grave-clothes flapped against his skeleton legs as he rode her down ; he had a dagger in his hand. He choked in death and strove to speak ; his throat strained. He was on her now, laughing, she thought. Then suddenly he spoke, and it was a dreadful word. It flared across the sunshine in letters of fire ; it rang out into the silence like the trump of God ; it crashed down upon her like a blow from a mailed fist.

She clung to the gate, while the world whirled past, and the horse dashed home with his tale of unspoken disaster. The sun beat on the saddle, and it was empty again.

Lady Daventry fell forward on her face.

She did not die ; she was too strong to die. Her brain lived on undimmed, only the left side of her body was dead, would never live again. She was paralysed. She

was to live to a great age, to see Margaret's, that hated woman, children and grandchildren at Daventry; to see happiness, love, success, companionship, and to stand for ever outside it. For company, at bed and board, she had that grey, gaunt, spectre, Memory, whose eyes were the eyes of the three Lord Daventrys whose fate she had moulded, and to what an end!

Bruce Daventry slept with his fathers and the two sons of his body, and the gates of death shut down upon a life that had been broken, and yet not all broken. For Dosé there was only Memory with the eyes of love and happiness. There had been seventeen years of perfect mating, with never a cloud upon a love that had been strong and wonderful. Never an hour when one had failed the other. So then the second Lady Daventry of this history went her way in peace.

What of the third Lady Daventry, Margaret Lister? Her husband gave her her choice, and she accepted the heritage, and the raking up of old scandals that it must mean.

"We will bear it together," she said, "for ourselves we have the right to leave it unclaimed, but we cannot answer for the lives that may be. We cannot cheat the next generation."

So Adam, thirteenth Lord Daventry, brought his wife down to the castle, and a grey-faced woman lying in her window saw them go past, and the radiance on their faces. They brought good luck and fortune to Daventry, for a new era, free from tragedy, began.

Margaret was happy as only those are happy who have first fought and endured. Without a battle there is no victory, and the finest, sweetest savours are lost.

And so, in part, the dead boy's dream came true, and Margaret, all in white like a bride, swept gladly down the stairs at Daventry to the arms of the man who awaited her. She walked in the magic moonlit garden with her lover's arm round her: she became the mother of a son.

But it was another who watched eagerly for her coming; another who held her close and in silence. Another who walked with her amid the scent of the roses, and the sound of the sea. And it was another man's son whom she bore.

400 THE SALE OF LADY DAVENTRY

The wages of death for Bruce Daventry, peace :
passing : for Lady Daventry the wages of life, great
and great regret, and no peace at all. If devil and man
closed with the bargain of her soul offered that day
the vicarage gate, then both devil and man had cheated
her. For Margaret Lister a struggle, and a very painful
victory. After long years she won to each goal of her desire
great fame ; great love ; great happiness. We left
her with the glory of achievement, and the glory of
possession, with husband and babe—though a babe with
concerning eyes !

THE END